



2024

# Imagination Creation

*Writing  
Competition*



2024

# Imagination Creation Writing Competition

*Poems & Stories*

Presented by:

Wyndham City Libraries

## Imagination Creation, 2024

This anthology is a collection of the prize-winning and shortlisted submissions to the 2024 Wyndham City Libraries Imagination Creation Writing Competition.

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## AWARDS

### **Age 15-18 Poetry**

First Prize: Elegy for myself, shin-deep in saltwater

Second Prize: Auburn

Ashmi Mukherjee

Zayan Haq

### **Age 15-18 Story**

First Prize: The Well-Wisher

Second Prize: Within the Lights

Olivia Boyd

Adiba Khan

### **Age 11-14 Poetry**

First Prize: One Stone; Five Lives

Second Prize: Whispers of skill

Aarna Shetty

Vinudi Bogahapitiya

### **Age 11-14 Story**

First Prize: The Final Question

Second Prize: The Colourless Man

Aradhya Dharani

Nivedya Prasanth

### **Age 5-10 Poetry**

First Prize: Ember's embrace

Second Prize: The Four Seasons

Deeshna Ashok

Divissha Sethi

### **Age 5-10 Story**

First Prize: Behind the Door

Second Prize: Amelia and Charlie's Big Adventure

James Yan

Akshana Ashok

### **Wyndham Local Award**

Ashmi Mukherjee

### **Margaret Campbell Award**

Deeshna Ashok

## SHORTLISTED ENTRIES 2024

### Age 15-18 Poetry

Trials of Nature  
Honeytrap  
Kamila

Sahnan Saini  
Allen Lu  
Adiba Khan

### Age 15-18 Story

Hammer and Nails (or) Splinters  
Beauty Beyond the Box  
Wine Ransom  
The Weight We Carry

Neo Serad  
Siya Gauri Singh  
Henry Eather  
Amelia Verga

### Age 11-14 Poetry

Corpses and the soil  
Day  
A sunset of glad and sorry

Nivedya Prasanth  
Lyra Chen  
Aishwarya Yarravajhala

### Age 11-14 Story

Two Shots  
A Different Perspective  
Ascending Pebble  
Poisoned Love  
The Willow Tree

Samiha Rukayat  
Sanjay Krishna Paruchuri  
Momina Khan  
Jashmine Marasini  
Sasandhi Sirinayaka

### Age 5-10 Poetry

Moonlight  
Little Yellow Bird  
Fire  
Excitement  
The Australian Bush

Rehet Kaur Grewal  
Ee Lyn Teh  
Kiaan Bhatia  
Ee Lyn Teh  
Syeda Aamnah Ahmed

### Age 5-10 Story

The Two Bugs  
Reef  
The Magical Forest

Anastasia Orescovici  
Rehet Kaur Grewal  
Saanvi Garg

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## ELEGY FOR MYSELF, SHIN-DEEP IN SALTWATER

Ashmi Mukherjee

Want, want, *want*.

Wanting gnaws at my bones

And hollows them down into

Concentric sticks of sugar.

Funny how they're so fragile,

The framework of your very being.

A weathered, brittle ankle

Snaps into fragmented shards.

It's the seawater.

The salt stings my exposed marrow

And poisons my blood.

It transforms me into worthless froth.

Worthless, wanting,

Wanting something more,

Wanting *worth*.

In January, I stood at the mouth

Of the ocean, pleading with its

Hungry soul to swallow me,

Steal me away in one fell swoop,

Destroy my very being until it

Was nothing but glowing foam

Under moonlight. We're all recycled

## ELEGY FOR MYSELF, SHIN-DEEP IN SALTWATER

Atoms, anyways, so what's  
One more lifetime?  
I stood shin-deep in the biting,  
Glassy water, my toes wedged  
Firmly in the sharp sand.  
There was probably a bit of broken  
Shell trying to slice my heel open,  
But I couldn't be bothered to  
Reach for it and chuck it  
Into the greedy reaches of  
Neptune's approximation of  
Tartarus.

Being out there was some odd  
Phantasmagoric  
State of existence, like  
When the body's asleep yet  
The mind awake, only  
I wasn't certain how much of me  
Was awake other than  
My slowly numbing skin.

Want, *want*,  
I wanted the ocean to sweep me

Ashmi Mukherjee

Away to a better state of existence.  
I shouted its true name out  
Towards the horizon,  
Or perhaps the phantasmagoria  
Shouted, in any case it  
Only rang out in a hollow mockery  
Of my despair. The framework  
Of my body felt long dissolved.  
January might as well have  
Been another universe if it weren't  
For the setting sun feebly  
Caressing where my collarbone  
Would've been, had my skeleton  
Not forsaken me. I had a hangnail,  
And I could feel the saltwater  
Splashing up and lapping at it.  
It hurt like hell.

*I should put a band-aid on that.*

I couldn't help but laugh at the  
Irony. Half dead  
Out in the ocean and I wanted  
A freaking band-aid for my

## ELEGY FOR MYSELF, SHIN-DEEP IN SALTWATER

Hangnail.

I stood out there, drenched  
In my shin-deep yearning,  
For so long it might as well  
Have been February by the time  
The sun set.

The moon's pearly grin seemed  
To sneer at me from its  
Reflection, distorted  
In front of my feet.  
My skin was getting pretty wrinkled,  
And the new cracks and crevices  
Weren't being filled with anything  
But dead, salty air.  
As much as I fancied disappearing  
Without a trace at nature's whim,  
No riptide reached to pull me under  
The glassy surface. No patch  
Of floating seaweed tied itself  
Into a noose and crawled up onto  
My neck. My prayers to the  
Luminescent altar I stood before  
Fell on deaf ears.

Ashmi Mukherjee

Worthless, wanting,  
Wanting something more,  
Wanting to be dead  
Because of how exhausted you are  
Of *being*.  
It was so damn tiring,  
*Being* all the time.  
Tiring living in a world built to  
Crack your bones  
Clean in half and suck the marrow  
Out of you.

A gentle wave loosened the  
Sand packed under my heel.  
I stumbled backwards.  
Nearly falling into the  
Mosaic of broken shell and  
Memory at the shore.  
The hem of my shorts  
Were wet and frayed,  
The skin of my legs practically dead.  
A booming, multitudinous voice  
Began to speak in the hollows  
Between my scalp and cranium.

## ELEGY FOR MYSELF, SHIN-DEEP IN SALTWATER

*There's no way to go forward  
Anymore. Go big or  
Go home. You can stay here  
Till judgement day,  
For all I care.*

And I would've,  
Had my body not started to regain  
Sensation.  
With a jolt, I realised the  
The previously dim cold had run up  
Behind me and tackled me around the ankles, racing up the remnants  
Of my spine and taking residence  
In my now chattering teeth.

I had been wanting for very long,  
But I would have to keep wanting,  
Enduring,  
Until a better day.  
Perhaps the framework of my being  
Was gone, but so long as my  
Constitution remained,  
I would have to remain with it.

Ashmi Mukherjee

Want, want, *want*.

Wanting sinks its canine teeth

Into my flesh and rips it to shreds,

Dissecting me as if I am

A cadaver washed up on the shore.

I let it consume me.

There will be very little left soon.

I will be worthless froth this February,

As the sea intends.

## AUBURN

Zayan Haq

Auburn, eyes, hair, her.

Everything about her stood out to me — her hair auburn like the burnt brown of the falling leaves in Autumn — free to find their place amongst the seas of endless green, but she'd never find her place — she'd never fit in — she'd always want, more.

Continue to be carried by the winds, continue to drift with the breeze, continue to crumble away in a search for something that'd make her whole, something that'd set her free. Auburn, Autumn — her auburn was autumn —

Fall, it made her fall away — in her search for solace from the storms, solace from the winter and it's whipping winds, solace from the ceaseless cold. She'd plead for it to cease, for it made her seize — the strict chokehold of the frosty touch of the chasing winter, would bring her to plead —

Plead for a cease to the ceaseless cold, her skin cold to the touch, as she finds solace in the swift slits that scored her scarred skin. Scored and scarred from the whipping words that chased the whipping winds, that followed her without cease —

So she sought an end to the endless cold — an end to the cold and what it'd cede. Sought an end to the calls, the calls to her to crumble, like a leaf caught by the breeze, she sought warmth when the cold wouldn't leave, she sought something that'd set her free.

Free, she'd finally be free.  
I lost my Auburn in Autumn.  
But she was finally free.



## THE WELL-WISHER

Olivia Boyd

According to the dictionary, a wish is an expression of a desire, typically in the form of a request or instruction.

There are many things that I wish for, though I cannot say I've ever expected them to come true or be fulfilled in any way. You see, I boarded a train once, not any particular train, just a desperate last hope to escape from an office job that had become as confining as it had once been liberating. This train was an older model and headed towards some small regional town with a name I couldn't pronounce properly, better yet, it was empty—well, almost empty. In a seat right up the back of the last carriage of the train was this man with a peculiar hat and gentle eyes. His presence almost seemed to invite one over, it was as though his eyes sang to you, 'come, accompany me on your travels.' I found myself drawn to that seat up the back and to the man who smiled as though he had anticipated my arrival all the while.

'Hello,' I greeted him with what I could only imagine was an awkward smile.

The man didn't respond and rather hummed softly.

'You have many wishes Mr. Taylor.'

Ah, my name which seemed to always be just out of reach now surfaced once more.

'Pardon my asking, but do I know you?' I asked the man.

'Hmmm, I don't believe you do. The real question would be do I know you?'

## THE WELL-WISHER

I looked at the man blankly. I wasn't anyone notable enough to be recognised even within my own office much less on a train headed quite literally to the middle of nowhere on a late Wednesday night. Perhaps seeing my confusion, the man let out a soft chuckle.

'No need to confuse yourself Mr. Taylor, I guess my perception is just a bit better than others.'

Perception he said—

'Mr Taylor, I am indeed a bit... different. I have a special ability of sorts, though of course it comes at a cost.'

'A special ability?' At this point, the whole debacle was beginning to sound more and more like a con of sorts.

'Yes, I can make wishes come true.'

I almost burst out laughing at his words, only the sincerity in his smile kept me from making a fool of myself. Wishes he had said, sure I had plenty of wishes, money, peace, stability, but I doubted that this man in front of me, with his peculiar hat and worn weekend bag would be in a position to fulfil any of them.

'Ah you jest, you nearly had me there!' I laughed.

The man frowned, 'it's no joke, I really do make wishes come true.'

'Of course you do,' I smiled, 'and what of this cost you mentioned.'

The man smiled once more, 'it's simple really. If you give me a story, I'll fulfil a wish of yours.'

'Any wish?'

'Any.'

It all seemed far too good to be true and I was never a believer in miracles to begin with but something about his slightly crooked smile and those naive eyes seemed to draw me in. After all he only wanted a story, it was a cheap price to pay for his supposed 'wish-fulfilling' services.

'What kind of story do you want?'

'Any kind will do, but preferably your story.'

I hesitated. I was never an imaginative child, I didn't create worlds of my own or protagonists with superficial abilities to save the world. If anything, I was a thief who was content with plundering the stories of those around me. I took stories from the wireless or the picture books lined up at school and shaped them into my own, yet I was never satisfied. While other children lived within the rich stories of their minds, I sat perplexed by the shallow tropes reenacted by the flimsy, two-dimensional characters I'd stolen. I suppose it was a justice of sorts that I could never appreciate the stories that I'd stolen. That I was condemned to marvel at my own imagination's mediocrity, if it could even be called that. But this man, with his captivating eyes and wavy hair, had asked me of all people for a story. I wondered if he truly was a psychic of some kind. If this was his punishment to me for my greedy ambitions.

## THE WELL-WISHER

Seeing my hesitation, the man spoke again, 'please take your time, after all the best stories are freely told.'

I looked at him and he smiled as though to comfort me. Feeling like a fool, I opened my mouth once more and began to tell the man a story. It wasn't really my story of course, just one of many I'd stolen and adapted.

'I don't have any family you know. My parents died when I was really young and my older sister, she left me. I think she realised that I'm not really me. I'm just a collection of all these other people... but I think everyone's like that. You are the way you are because your parents raised you like that. I'm the same but I was raised and created by others. Maybe I'm just justifying myself...'

I stopped talking. If this was a story, it was probably the worst story there was. Still the man remained silent, his kind eyes watching mine.

'I don't really have a story to tell. I was born, my parents passed away and I lived. I took each day as it was and I got older. Each year passed and now I feel that time is passing but I'm stuck in this place that I can't leave because time's moving without me. I'm being left behind, you know. I think it started when I first watched a TV program. When I first realised what a story was. Maybe I'm inherently jealous, maybe we're all inherently jealous and I'm just bad at hiding it. But yeah. That's my story. It's a pitiful story of someone who lived their entire life trying to be a protagonist despite knowing, perhaps more so than anyone else that I'm not. I'm not even worthy of being an extra. If anything I would be the background, the wallpaper that exists only to provide a stage for others to shine. That's my story.'

The man smiled and I found myself holding back my tears. His smile held this priceless simplicity. It was simply a smile, not a sad smile or a jeering smile, just... a smile.

‘Thank you,’ he glanced out the window at the scenery that was passing by. The weather had grown increasingly grey and the clouds seemed to be barely containing the storm within them.

He turned back to face me, ‘I will take your story and keep it safe, in exchange, what is it you wish for?’ I couldn’t stop myself from laughing, after bearing my heart in its entirety to this strange man his promise to fulfil my wish seemed like such a distant matter.

‘Let’s meet again sometime.’ I smiled. The man’s eyes flickered with a strange emotion that made my chest tighten.

‘Yes, let’s meet again...’ he murmured.

When I opened my eyes the first thing I felt was a tight sensation in my chest and then a pounding headache as I tried and failed to recall the events that’d just passed. Slowly I climbed out of bed and walked to the small wardrobe across the room. It was a Thursday and I knew that I surely worked, otherwise I couldn’t possibly afford this apartment but I couldn’t recall where I worked nor could I picture the faces of my coworkers, and my name... it seemed I could no longer remember that either. I changed into warm clothes and locked the apartment behind me, at least I remembered my passcode. I walked down the stairs and onto the street and just as I turned the corner I stopped.

Looking at me from across the hall was a man with a peculiar hat and gentle eyes. I didn’t know him but he seemed so familiar and I found myself drawn to his smile.

‘Hello Mr. Taylor. If you’d like to tell me a story, I can make your wishes come true.’

## THE WELL-WISHER

Mr. Taylor? Right, that was my name. I'd almost forgotten it. I was going to refuse him, after all I wasn't one to randomly entertain a stranger I'd only just met, but his eyes seemed to sing to me and invite me in. I found myself smiling resignedly.

'Alright, what kind of story would you like to hear?' Afterall I was the best when it came to taking stories and making them my own.

And so the man with his peculiar hat listened to my tale with great sincerity and when I'd finished spinning some fable about my life which seemed to become more and more empty and fragmented by the day he asked me what it was I wished for.

'Let's meet again sometime.' I replied looking into his gentle eyes.

The man smiled wistfully, 'of course Mr. Taylor.'

## WITHIN THE LIGHTS

Adiba Khan

*My father once commented: "I belong in Bangladesh, your children will belong in Australia. And you..."*

At the cusp of midnight, there drove a lone Toyota Corolla on a desolate country path. I desperately searched for my way home, yearning for the comforting lights that marked my destination. Lost. Panicked. The vibrant lustre of the Milky Way scattered specks of glitter onto the dark ocean of the countryside, yet these were not the lights I sought. Instead, I faced an endless road, with no promise of home. A faint light of hope flickered on my face, beguiling my weak heart. I drove on, tentative and uncertain.

A tsunami of memories devoured me. I was young when we first moved to Australia. "Young", despite experiencing a lifetime within the precious years of my childhood. A childhood filled with festivals, markets and celebrations. I lived in a wonderland across the Indian Ocean. In my country: Bangladesh. Where the lights would never go out, where the people of the dusk would stay awake to greet the people of the dawn. A land that never slept, always growing and fighting for the spotlight. And now the switch has turned off. My parents have covered my childhood with a blanket, inviting gloom by moving to this country. Where you could hear the wind whisper the cries of the loners, and the cloud absorb the brightness of life. They would wipe my tears and remind me, "This is our land now, sweetheart, this is where we belong."

We would search for traces of home. My mother would locate river banks and hire sightseeing cruises like the ones in Bangladesh. But a chameleon cannot blend in with a lounge of lizards, so we chose to assimilate. Long drives and barbeques on the weekend kept us busy, but then Miss Rona appeared and taught us a lesson. I was chained to a prison, begging the warden for a chance to visit my wonderland one last time.

## WITHIN THE LIGHTS

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I accelerated, the road infinite and the twinkles from the universe starting to vanish. Not a soul was in sight, just an empty country.

My mind flew back to the time my stomach twisted and turned with each surge of excitement as I traced the glow of Dhaka on the foggy window of the airplane. I remembered gawking out at the sky like a newborn seeing the world for the first time, mumbling my first word: "home."

...

"...Home"? Where the fisherman's cry would wake you up? Where the traffic congestion would assure you of human life other than your own? Then why had I heard the familiar whispers of the wind? I belonged, I did. I *belong*-

The car swerved sideways, but I quickly re-adjusted back to the road.

"Time does not heal wounds, it violently tears you apart," I muttered monotonously.

We had moved from the city centre to the outskirts near the remote villages. It was just like Australia: dark, bleak, and isolated. Days flew by like minutes as I stayed cooped up in my tiny room, alone on the land I supposedly adored. Grief plagued my thoughts, so my father decided to take me to my childhood apartment. But when we arrived, the place was nothing more than rocks and rubble.

I followed a radiant light in the distance, shining brighter and illuminating the rural grasslands along the road. I halted suddenly in front of a lighthouse, with no sign of inhabitants. I thought I was home, but this was not where I belonged.



Calmly, I recollected my thoughts. I realized something after arriving in Australia. I was homeless, neither Australian nor Bangladeshi. No land was mine, yet I was a citizen of both, like a stray cat declaring a new house as its provider each week.

Though, I remember that night distinctly, New Year's Eve. The sky was on fire, the earth rumbling with thousands erupting in joy. You could see an ocean of people; some with chocolate skin, some with thick Aussie accents and some proudly speaking in their Asian tongue. And even a blind person could sense the one thing that united them all: their shared harmony and bond. One could have spent their whole life in Vietnam, while one's ancestors arrived on this land thousands of years ago. One would never reply "Australia" when asked for their origins, while one would serve and die for this country. Because on that night of resolutions and fireworks, it did not matter. It did not matter because we were one, and we were whole. The wind did not whisper, and the lights overshadowed the clouds. And dare I say, I felt I belonged. Among the vibrant markets, busy streets and content smiles of the people with distinct backstories, it felt like home.

Because the land I was on never dictated where I belonged, the people did. Even in Bangladesh in the barren countryside, visits to my loved relatives and festivals in the city made me feel alive. Yes, for some natives like my grandfather and the Indigenous Australians, the land with its rich history and traditions may define home. And for immigrant kids like me, the answer lies deeper within the human experiences. Yet these are closely connected because searching for belonging, is a twisted journey worth a lifetime.

...

*My father's words echoed in my mind, "...And you belong wherever we are."*

The lights invited me, and as I arrived at an isolated town celebrating a new year, the warm laughter of welcoming townsmen calmed my nerves. "Lost" I was no more. This may not be home, but it was good for now.

--

## ONE STONE; FIVE LIVES

Aarna Shetty

She glides across, so graceful, yet effortless,  
As if she is walking on water.  
Glissading towards the reeds that encompass the lake,  
She finds a ratchet but orderly cradle where milky white orbs lie.  
Her children.

Once she is inside her nest, she attentively shifts her position.  
She gingerly huddles her eggs,  
Keeping them warm, despite the light winter breeze that ruffles her feathers.

She protects them with her life.  
She can't bear the thought of losing anything else.  
She doesn't think she'll even survive the pain.

She cries a symphony.  
One of love, anger, grief and pain.  
Her swansong.

Young Timothee Norman has a stone in hand.  
He wanders nearby the lake,  
And discerns the nest,  
Inside of which settle eggs,  
Along with a mother swan in between them all.

He thinks he is fortunate today,  
And decides to try his luck.

Feet steady, positioning himself,  
He flits a strand of hair under his cap,  
Shifting his gaze towards the unknowing mother.  
He takes his stone and releases it,  
Hitting four eggs.

The unsuspecting swan turns her head around,  
Only to find that her eggs have been destroyed.  
That her children have been murdered.

She cries a flood of tears.  
And then, she cries a symphony.  
One of love, anger, grief and pain.  
Her swansong.

She feels her heart stop beating,  
And then she finally closes her eyes.  
One last time.  
She dies of heartbreak.

But one egg lies,

## ONE STONE; FIVE LIVES

Untouched, at the corner of the nest,  
Hiding behind several overgrown reeds.

As young Timothee leaves the lake's edge,  
He hums a tune to himself.  
One of pride, joy, delight and indifference,  
But he will never know,  
Just how much he has changed the course of this little egg's life,  
As of this moment.

## WHISPERS OF SKILL

Vinudi Bogahapitiya

In an eerie dark corner, where shadows move  
Lays fine white silk stuck and still  
An artwork, full of wonder to prove  
The everlasting talent of a spider skill

In a rusty old attic, isolated and alone  
Is the same design, seen and shown  
Some are visible, but others are unknown  
But after some time you realize it's grown

For some, it is a piece of inspiration  
For others, it is known to revolt  
Some, gaze with fascination  
While others see it they jolt

The unique pattern  
A wonder so still  
Nothing so firm  
Of the spider's skill

## THE FINAL QUESTION

Aradhya Dharani

The flashing lights were blinding. They roamed around the highly decorated stage, landing on someone and illuminating them for all to see. I gulped, staring into the inky blackness of the crowd, just hundreds of silhouettes watching, waiting. *For me.*

Situated on the left-hand side, I had nothing with me but my water bottle that I'd crushed from stress and my own nervous breathing and pounding heart, so loud I was surprised the crowd couldn't hear it. I tapped my embellished nails on the counter I was situated at, cringing heavily as the lights flickered to me once more.

And stayed there.

The game show host grinned wildly, his black lips arching back over pearl white teeth as he winked, too-long eyelashes fluttering wildly. I was half afraid he'd fly away.

"And now," he boomed, his effervescent voice ricocheting off the walls and ringing in my ears. "Let's review the scores."

Spinning on one heel, he pivoted around to face the gigantic flashing scoreboard. A knot of dread untied in my stomach as I peered at the tally.

I was down two points.

And with only three questions left, my opponent was sure to win.

I could feel the judgmental gaze of the leering crowd on me, but all their faces mingled as one as I turned towards our host, my breath hitching. "What happens now?" I asked, my voice guttural. He straightened, running a hand through neon pink hair.

"We keep playing."

I nodded numbly, switching my focus to the centre of the stage. There, basked in royal shades of red and purple, sat the prize.

The reason I had chosen to put myself in such peril.

A painting.

My white knuckled grip tightened on my counter as I peered at a small, insignificant clock in the corner of the room.

This time, a month ago, I had made the hardest decision of my life.

I still remembered the fight- the screaming and the words said. My mum told me I was a selfish fame-seeker.

I told her this was the only way.

Every year, the game show Ride or Die holds a painting as the prize. These painting are intricate and extraordinary, and exude an aura found nowhere else. But the painting wasn't what I was interested in.

I cared about it's worth.

The highest bid for the painting was three million.

The only problem, however, was that the name of the game show was to be taken literally. Every year, the loser vanishes, never to be seen or heard from again.

Just the thought of that caused my body to shudder violently, and only the image of my sick and starving baby brother, having to work seven hours a day for a single meal, made me grit my teeth and hold my chin up high.

*I would do this.*

Our host cleared his throat, silencing the crowd. It was the heavily practiced dexterity of it that nearly made me choke on a nervous laugh. The crowd spoke as one, quieted as one. Good and obedient robots, waiting for only a torpid wave of a hand from our host to prompt them back into mindless chatter.

"Next question." He thundered, his voice rolling through the room like waves on the restless ocean. I leaned forward in reluctant anticipation, a pool of sweat forming next to my ear.

The humidity of the air was so thick I could've swum through it.

"What is the primary material used in upholstery?"

## THE FINAL QUESTION

*Ding!* The sound of my button had gone off before I'd even processed what he had said.

The next few seconds were followed by silence.

"If you're not going to answer the question-" Our host began.

"Wait." I interrupted, choking on my own words. I licked my dry and cracked lips, peering around the room almost in a desperate plea.

My gaze landed on the painting.

And there... I saw it. Almost as if the painting was moving, the head of the gorgeous woman in the frame inclined almost imperceptibly- towards the wool rug in the corner.

No- I had to have been hallucinating.

But still, with no other choice, I closed my eyes, preparing for the worst.

"Wool."

Through my eyelids, I knew the lights had changed to green. It was only when cheers erupted from all around me, however, that I let relief flood through every pore of my body, and I released the breath I'd been holding.

"Well, well, that was fast." Our host chortled, as a blood-curdling shiver went down my spine. I was still losing. I gawked once more at the painting.

It was back to normal.

Studying the curly brown hair of the girl in the picture, her lavish dress and intricate bow, I almost didn't hear our host as he called mine and my opponent's name.

"How do you feel about how tonight is going?" He asked, absentmindedly running a hand through his hair, as if to give it purpose.

I leaned into my microphone, eyes going glossy as I surveyed the crowd. "I don't want to lose."

In unison, they let out dull snickers.



The disorientating lights roamed around the stage inconsequently, before settling on the painting, as if to taunt me.

“Well,” the host began. “It’s either that or end up like dear Rosa.”

I sucked in a sharp breath of putrid air as I remembered the cowering contestant from last year, a little girl, with gorgeous brown ringlets for hair that I was so envious of. Her competition was a stoic, unfeeling young man who had demolished her.

She couldn’t have stood a chance.

“Speaking of Rosa, let’s see if you can remember a question from last year.” The host swept his foot across the marble tiles, and the atmosphere shifted to suspense, like a shadow looming above us all.

“What restaurant was Harry Potter written in?”

My brain nearly exploded from my skull. My trepidation must have been palpable, because my opponent stiffened.

I glared wildly at the girl in the painting.

I was hallucinating again.

That was the only possible explanation.

Her moth was moving- she was- *saying* something.

*Elephant- Café-*

“THE ELEPHANT CAFÉ!”

I was hollering my answer before I could even comprehend what had just happened.

“Correct again.” The host drawled, a gleam in his razor-sharp eyes.

“We appear to have come to a tie.” He turned to the audience. “However, there is one question left.”

The world sucked in a breath. Everything blurred around me- the insufferable lights, the idiosyncratic host, the chanting of the needy crowd...

I locked eyes with my opponent at the other end of the stage.

## THE FINAL QUESTION

Her mouth was moving in a silent prayer.

Understanding and grief sparked through me, but I gulped them down.

We had both chosen this.

Now, only one of us would walk out alive.

A month of preparation had come to this one moment.

The final question.

“Earth’s largest living structure... is a coral reef.”

My hand, heavy as lead, moved slowly, too slow.

Fists clenched tight enough to draw blood, I slammed my hand down on my buzzer.

I felt the stare of hundreds on me as I turned to the painting.

A hasty shake of the head.

“Incorrect.” I whispered, gratitude and solace consuming me.

I was going to go home.

I was going to see my brother.

I was-

“I’m afraid-” the host began, his voice a low growl.

My heart sunk.

“The only thing that’s incorrect, is your answer.”

“No.” I choked. It had to have been a mistake- the painting *told* me-

My opponent sunk to the floor in relief.

A numbness washed over my body as I stared down at my shoes and closed my eyes.

--

I was never going to see my friends and family again.

I locked eyes with the host, a silent beg for mercy, but his face was cold and calculating.

"Don't fret." He purred. "It'll be fun."

I would've asked him what he meant, had the ground not have given way at that very moment.

I fell into the abyss of nothingness.

---

"Hello."

It was the soft, perspicuous voice that brought me back from the endless void of panic and sorrow I had fallen into.

I leaned back, feeling the gentle grass with my bloody hands.

*Where had grass come from?*

I observed the girl standing in front of me, her lazy, cultivated smile, ravishing brown locks, serpentine bow...

I gasped in utter terror.

"Who are you?"

"Rosa." She replied, her eyes darkening a fraction.

I was unable to stifle my sob as I shook my head frantically.

"I'm sorry." She said calmly. "I had to give you the wrong answer- I was lonely."

That was when I saw it.

A large pane of glass.

And on the other side...

I saw the host of the show crowning my opponent in medals and wreaths.

## THE FINAL QUESTION

Reality dawned on me, a harrowing, ghastly beast.

I was somehow inside the painting.

And I was stuck.

## THE COLOURLESS MAN

Nivedya Prasanth

The colourless man, as they called him, wasn't really anything special to write about. He woke up, got ready for work, went to work, got back home, went to the shops and brooded in his colourless mansion. But then again... everyone has a story about change. You see, this story is not of how he became colourless. He was born colourless, he cried the most eventless cry the hospital had ever heard. The man never smiled at his impossibly perfect essays and tests. He didn't even offer a grin when he got his first job! Or his promotion! Or even when his business kicked off into high gear! The man simply did not see the use of emotion.

Like I have said before, this story of change is how colour forced its way into his life. The colour that forced itself into his life was a rosy cheeked girl who seemed to be just shy of ten. You see, this girl was an orphan, she was born with a life-threatening cough, more than enough reasons for someone to become dispirited but somehow, every room and person had no choice but to be bright when she was with them. Of course, knowing the universe, it had to match the most dull man to the brightest of children.

The man was on his usual run from the groceries for a bland dinner of steak, potatoes and peas, which is delicious but when you have it everyday...not so much. As he crossed a park bench, his peripheral vision spotted a young thing in pigtails, wheezing uncontrollably. He approached the being. Mind you, he was dull but not heartless. Despite the pain she seemed to be enduring, the girl beamed with the luminance of the rising sun, "Hello kind man".

He nodded in response, "Good evening".

The girl did not seem to be affected by the man's dullness but sat there humming contently to herself, legs waving in the air. The man frowned, not fully understanding why he sat there in the first place and nodded before walking off to his daily routine.

The next late afternoon, the girl seemed to still be there.

The man seemed to have met another creature of habit.

Something small and warm started in his chest but left just as fast. Yet, he could not seem to bring himself to leave the girl alone and found himself seated beside her again.

## THE COLOURLESS MAN

"Hello again, kind man!" she beamed even brighter than before, if physically possible.

He nodded, a little bit more enthusiastically, "Good evening, little girl".

The gleaming girl did not want this stranger to leave her again so she pushed the conversation on, "Are you wondering anything?".

He looked like a stag caught in headlights. Nobody asked what was going on in his mind, expecting it to be boring and not worth discussing. "Well," he cleared his throat, "Where are your parents?".

"Gone" she did not seem to be fazed by it but her gleam faltered ever so slightly.

He nodded as she grinned broadly back at him, "Do you have a family, kind sir?".

"No, not really".

The girl placed her tanned, tiny hand over his pale, skeletal one. His eyes widened but did not want the warmth of her palm to leave. A brotherly rush of affection ran through his bones into his very marrow. This girl was trusting a man she had never known before. This brilliant girl, who had faced hardships no one should face still had a smile reaching her eyes.

The colourless man wanted to ensure this colourful girl didn't lose her warmth, so he shrugged off his coat and handed it to her which she took gratefully. He stood up, alerted his departure formally and left on his way, the bitter air biting at him but he couldn't remotely feel it.

The next afternoon, he saw the girl there, but her condition seemed to have worsened. Her little button nose was ruby red and eyes reduced to little slits and a cough seemed to be shaking every bone in her tiny frame. He approached her, not expecting her signature smile- but there it was.

He did not sit this time, which saddened the girl deeply, but strived to not show it.

"Do you have no place to seek shelter?", eyes coated with deep concern for the unbothered girl.

She shook her head wildly, pigtails ruffling, "No sir".

What he did next was probably the best action he will ever do, but of course he did not know it. The 'emotionless' man held out his palm for her to take, the girl accepted wholeheartedly, "Dear girl. If you trust me so, I shall give you shelter and care, for I have a place yet no one to occupy it".

The poor, rosy cheeked girl shook with delight and skipped along with the genuinely emotional man.

The next year was the best for both of our characters. Nothing changed in the man's routine. He still woke, got ready for work, went to work, came home, went to the market but no more did he brood. He was no longer the colourless man, he was the loved man. Loved by the colour a little girl managed to bring to his cheeks. She read with him, learned to play chess, read some more and cooked something different every day. He went far and wide, through all his connections for countless amounts of doctors to cure his colourful girl but none could cure it, rather lengthen the time before the worst symptoms took place. The man did not tell the girl, it would sadden her and add to a burden that did not need adding to.

The girl spent her days taking her medicine with no complaints and talking her heart out to the always hearing ears of the loving man. In a year he could not physically remember a time when this pigtailed ray of pure joy was not gleaming through his life. The girl was taking a turn for the worst and no cure was working but she dutifully watered the growing plant outside the man's office. She talked to it until her coughing would force her back into bed. The man also, extremely dutifully stayed by her side through everything.

Not every story has a happy ending, but that depends on how you view the ending. The man was alone again as the bright girl fell into eternal sleep, with a smile on her face. The tree was still taken care of, a silent oath he had kept. The bright tree outside his office window with glowing leaves of blue, purple and red reminded of the colourful girl that painted a beautiful painting on his blank canvas until her paint ran out.

## EMBER'S EMBRACE

Deeshna Ashok

Emerald carpets of sprouting wheat,  
rivers of golden, sweet corn,  
misty valleys dotted with caribou,  
the land of rich soil and moist forests.

Suddenly, the birds fell silent,  
the life and sound had been sucked out,  
silent tension radiated.  
The whole world held back its breath.

A small ember embedded in the soft grass  
left a lasting imprint,  
not even the healing power of nature could fix.  
It all started with a small ember that grew into a monster.

Roaring ferociously  
bright colours dance,  
danger leaps with every spark,  
flickering, flashing.



Deeshna Ashok

Teary eyes reflected fear,  
and their burning home etched in their hearts.  
Screams and devastation,  
hope and anticipation.

Tears drop onto the burnt grass,  
and sobs incessantly echo throughout  
the broken, scorched world.  
Sadness and anxiety washes over everything.

Crackling with despair,  
the smell of burnt trees diffuses,  
choking the sky with grey, threatening murk.  
The gloomy air was thick with hope and desperation.

Pushing through raw wilderness,  
multiplying instantly,  
feeding on greenery,  
leaving behind devastation.

The armies of green leafy plants,  
that covered the whole earth,  
were now blackened and in ruins,  
leaving behind a grey, lonely, naked sweep of earth.

## EMBER'S EMBRACE

The red furious beast  
that viciously devoured every chance of life.  
Plants and vegetation now left in ruins,  
the beast that ate it all.

## THE FOUR SEASONS

Divissha Sethi

Crimson leaves falling on the ground,  
Easter baskets overflowing with treats,  
Chocolate eggs the delicacy of the month,  
Foraging for sweet candy,  
It's Autumn

Snow piling up on the ground  
Chilly winds like a knife on your cheeks  
Marshmallows bobbing in mugs of hot cocoa  
Warming your body by the hearth of a crackling fire  
It's Winter

Flowers blossoming like a shooting umbrella  
Butterflies flapping their rainbow wings  
Raining like an open shower  
Nature is a gift of the world  
It's Spring

Crystal waves sprinting on the shore  
Sandcastles like display homes on the street  
Strings of shells and pearls hang around your neck  
Slipping, slapping & slopping on the sand  
Beach towels rolled out

## THE FOUR SEASONS

Like sewn on rags  
With umbrellas on top  
Emerald green palm trees waving in the wind  
Melting ice creams, zooper doopers and more  
Dolphins splashing about  
The sunset painting the sky  
It's Summer

## BEHIND THE DOOR

James Yan

My eyes were close to drooping down to the ground as numerous rays of sunlight flashed into my eyes. I was craving a delectable peanut butter sandwich. My stomach ached more and more as I climbed downstairs. Groaning thunderingly, I opened the refrigerator to find the bread. As I began scavenging through the icy compartments of the fridge, I felt a mighty pulling sensation, tugging onto my face. I shuffled closely, letting my intrusive thoughts take over. I reached inside what seemed like a portal, getting sucked into it...

In the blink of an eye, I had teleported into a crisp, boreal environment, surrounded by tremendous cartons of milk, expired cheese and even old socks! I had been sucked into the refrigerator! A buzz began echoing in the area, ringing in my ears as a shadow hovered above my head. It was a dreaded insect, covered in the most unspeakably horrendous grime. I had shrunk to the size of a baked bean, so I had no chance of escaping. It seemed to me that the only option was to let it devour me, along with the other rotten snacks hidden in the depths of the fridge.

My heart was thumping louder than the bug's buzzing. I analysed the food around me until something caught my eye—an opened jar of honey. I scrambled towards it, curling the expired syrup into balls, and then tossing them at the monstrous parasite. After a few shots, it toppled to the ground. I searched through the fridge, which had me close to gagging but at last, I located the portal and returned to the kitchen, quickly patching up the portal with duct tape before anything else happened.

After I decided to try and find the bread a second time, the portal ate the tape and took me back into the revolting outskirts of the fridge.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" I cried in despair.

## AMELIA AND CHARLIE’S BIG ADVENTURE

Akshana Ashok

WHOOSH!!! The sea was wild, like a frightening tiger ready to pounce on its prey. Amelia and her brother Charlie, were speeding across the great raging sea on their most royal boat “The Atlantic”, dodging all the colossal stones and sharp pieces of ice! BOOM! A stone crashed into the left side of “The Atlantic”, shaking the bones of the boat. Their boat began to sink rapidly, so she grabbed her brother’s hand and hauled him onto Amigos, their dolphin. In the chaos, Charlie’s (Amelia’s brother) arm was grazed by the anchor, leaving him bleeding and nearly drowning until Amigos gallantly dove into the water and saved him.

### **The way back home...**

Lost and unsure of the way back, they sought refuge in a nearby village. A kind villager invited them to stay in his cosy hillside bungalow. Amelia and Charlie settled into the house, slurping on steaming, warm lemongrass chicken stew and munching on freshly baked soft sesame bread. The siblings had such a great feast that night.

The next day, they woke up nice and early. Amigos had found a GPS, so they thanked the villager, hurried back onto Amigos, and rushed home. Their parents were waiting for them with pale, worried looks on their faces. Amelia and Charlie ran up to their parents and hugged them so tight that they couldn’t breathe. After explaining the long, scary and adventurous story to their parents, the mischievous siblings promised never ever to venture out into the dangerous ocean alone again.

## TRIALS OF NATURE

Sahnian Saini

The courtroom falls silent as the judge enters with might  
"Order in the court" echoes through the hallowed hall  
To deliberate crimes which have wrought such blight  
Mother Nature cowers as she begins to recall

"The whirlwind of humanity's greed and wrath  
Despite offering them all my fruitful gifts  
Ravaging and consuming everything in their path  
Their gluttonous appetite persists"

"Tearing down the trees that once stood proud and tall  
Grey painted sky casting shadows over me  
The innocent creatures of my world, flee and fall  
Echoes of their cries, begging to be free"

As she silently mourns before a heartless jury  
For crimes against nature, they refuse to admit  
Corrupt intentions they harbour impurely  
In the shadow of sin, her cries they acquit

## TRIALS OF NATURE

The gavel bangs with fury, ruling her fate  
The verdict announced without any debate  
In the trail of despair, ruled by power and hate  
The eternal injustices remembered on that date

The court adjourns, but the justice feels lost  
Corrupt powers walk free, indifferent to the cost

Hear this; my final requiem  
Sing it when I'm gone  
All life lost for millennium  
A withered tree remains, where life had once shone



## HONEYTRAP

Allen Lu

The arachnid,  
Spinning, spinning, spinning,  
Weaving a concatenation of concentric circles,  
Expanding outward by perfect proportions ,  
So tightly-knit, so cleanly-woven.

Scroll, scroll, scroll,  
Like unraveling a ball of yarn,  
Flow silken strands.  
Basking in the shimmering summer,  
Befallen by dewdrops of December,  
Radiating scent of humidity.

Spin, spin and spin once more!  
Waiting and waiting...  
Until the poor prey parks,  
Unaware of its end.

Through the threads surge the chemicals,  
Scrolling and spinning, the strands go,  
Inducing the infinite flow of dopamine,  
The bittersweetness that ensues,  
Inducing in every avenue:

## HONEYTRAP

Ecstasy and escape.

Oh, who would not want a taste?

To be reduced to a pseudo-slumber,

Unaware of self,

Unaware of surroundings,

The thought of expulsion of one from oneself.

'Could this be Nirvana?' wonders the prey,

Yet demise is nigh; the hunter crawls by.

In their ears, erect an iron chamber.

One bearing ricocheting words,

Banging off its steel walls,

Causing sound to clash and fall.

Words of luxury, of fear, of thought,

Words of fake news,

Airbourne in a free-fall.

The insect remains like a block of clay,

Yet to be shaped, sculpted by falsehood,

And falsities of grandeur,

As the venom only grows stronger.

Yet unaware remains the victim.

The insect now ensnared in silk,

Legs snapped, body twisted,

Yet unaware remains the victim.  
As illusions weave and spin,  
Creating a maze of mirrors,  
Bright lights flicker,  
Neon beams reflect  
Off every mirror.  
With every fleeting image of,  
Numbers, thumbs up or down.  
Feeds the prey's mind,  
Oh how the prey would kill,  
Just for a little more quantity.  
Oh, how you'd assign values to,  
Ones and Zeros,  
For an extra dose of dopamine.

Ephemeral flashes, fleeting sparks.  
The mirage of a perfect you,  
The 'you' that owns more numbers,  
The 'you' you could've been...  
'What if...'  
'If only...',  
'I wish...'  
Thus begins the theophagy of idols.  
Jealousy, envy, longing:

## HONEYTRAP

Venom created by the insect,  
Like quicksand, those emotions,  
Only forces the insect to sink further,  
And further,  
And further,  
And further.

The chemicals alone saturate,  
Dopamine, validation and ecstasy,  
The caramel sugariness of honey,  
Hormones enough,  
To quench the bottomless thirst.  
'Who needs real connection anyway?'  
'The real world doesn't even compare.'  
It won't be long until the insect,  
Ceases all thought.  
Long gone were the stars that once shone.  
Apathy had swallowed the prey before the spider.

What once was an unexplored utopia,  
Where freedom meets the eye,  
Bringing an inviting aura,  
Infinite possibility.  
Wonderful, isn't it?

The first dose is what keeps us wanting,  
Wanting and wanting,  
More and more.  
No matter how much you move,  
You only tighten the grip of the web.  
No matter how furiously you fly,  
You're addicted to the venom, aren't you?  
It's only natural after all.  
The insect's eyes, devoid of hue,  
Now, a zombie to the honey of hormones.  
Yet unaware remains the victim.  
Crafty is the architect of this honeytrap!

Ultimately trapped within a clear cage,  
Boasting an open exit,  
If only we didn't succumb to the venom...  
Fleeting lights, artificial nights,  
The 'Grand Escape' we all wish to achieve,  
Yet unaware remains us who are willing to bear,  
Negligence towards the cruelty of fate,  
The naivety that ensnares ourselves.  
Validation, timely rain amidst a drought,  
Dopamine, a drug designed by Belphegor,  
As we seek refuge within the cold fire,

- -

## HONEYTRAP

Its icy blaze would only leave you frigid.

If only we'd known sooner to desert,

This spider web that we call the "internet".

--

KAMILA  
Adiba Khan

little girl, chubby cheeks, brown skin  
she gazes, allured, by her glass twin  
oh Kamila, frolicking with her reflection  
knowing ever so well, this was her first connection

no one cares, they say, as she now withers away,  
in a world full of noise, she silently decays  
the mirror's reflection is a cruel, twisted lie,  
a battleground where her body and mind both die

praised for her intellect, condemned for her figure  
the backhanded comments only made her reach for the scissors  
oh Kamila, if only she was perfect  
the empty void in her soul, she would no longer need to neglect

no one cares, they say, as she shrinks to a ghost,  
chasing the ideal, a deadly boast.  
bones that protrude, skin pale and tight,  
she still was that little girl, but lost in the fight

## KAMILA

she dances with the shadows, a dangerous game  
seeking solace in numbers, seeking control in shame  
oh Kamila, beware, each bite is a longing regret  
the scale screams back as a daily threat

no one cares, they say, as she isolates out of view  
a prisoner of fear, adamant to unveil once anew  
empty plates, empty dreams, a heart that's confined,  
a hollow shell, a fractured mind.

girl. cheeks. skin  
oh Kamila, a thin hollow canvas, nothing within  
hope wanes, dreams echo, memories fade  
no one cares, they say, and she replies, betrayed

no one cared as she tore herself apart  
as she scribbled over her flaws, ruining her fine art  
oh Kamila, think, think with your vibrant messy mind  
would it truly matter if the world were blind?



Adiba Khan

the thigh gap, narrow waist, wide hips  
would that be the last thought, as your final heartbeat skips?  
to lose the strength to dream, to strive,  
would anyone care, if you failed to survive?

“no one cares”, but simply change the tone  
a fulfilled life lead, with a shift in perspective alone  
oh Kamila, she will fly and she will fall  
but why give a damn, when no one’s watching at all?

“no one cares...”, they urge  
“no one cares”, she agrees  
they stare between the realms of reflection and reality  
separated by a thin layer of insanity

## HAMMER AND NAIL (OR) SPLINTERS

Neo Serad

There's something I've been meaning to ask you.

All those nights, why did you have to invite me into your treehouse?

Maybe that's a bit blunt.

How about this: why do teenagers seem to search, to scrape for, scrutinise any person for any potential of love, way before they're ready? Not that that's necessarily less blunt. I'm referring to emotionally underdeveloped to the extent that it's legitimately concerning how one admits their feelings and the other rationally reciprocates such a gambled exertion of emotion. A plunge into a depth of toxicity, obscurity. Sequences of mixed signals and ringings of missed messages. Probably explains why so many treehouses are popping up nowadays. I mean, just yesterday I saw one more get built a few blocks away from me.



I've been trying not to be annoyed and angry that I couldn't help you out of an issue we both know exists – you didn't let me. But it is pretty annoying. Someone does or says something that reminds me of you and – thankfully it's gotten better, but – it activates an entire avalanche of memories, and the little things become representative of all the things. You never ended up giving me a chance to rebuild your treehouse. You liked it just the way it was, beautiful on the outside, truly broken and in-need-of-repair on the inside. Still, you invite others in, luring them in with its polished grain and pretty door frames. Maybe, by not letting me pick up any tools to help, you saved me from the battles too difficult for me to aid in. Maybe that's what pisses me off about your treehouse in particular. It's not like you didn't know the interior was damaged and creaking – you did. It's like you so vividly knew that you were hurt and wounded, but you still chose to focus on maintaining your surfaces,

instead of healing your internal foundations. As if the person who needed to pick up the hammer wasn't yourself.

Your appealing personality hid your internal bleeding. And you became a natural at it.



You scrounged for love anywhere you could find it – even if it meant taking it from someone else – the very thing that drove you to me. We would always try and one-up each other on gifts – sometimes we were so absorbed in our own generosity that we had gotten a gift for each other at the same time. Always at the same bubble tea shop next to work, even though we never bought each other boba. No matter what, we ordered each other that same mango smoothie with sugar that could have given me Type II if I was rostered on for more days with you. There was a time where we loved to idolise each other's dreams and futures. Clocked out in that empty car park in front of Woolies; in that space of liminality, where everyone went home to sleep, and when all our unembellished flaws, feelings, and futures came out to play and morph and console and intertwine and do everything they've never done before. The first time in years where I felt like I could speak. Really speak. Judgementless. Of how you wanted to be the first to go to uni, become an architect, better your future. And all we could hear were our hushed voices and the rumbling ambience of everyone rushing home from work on the M1.

But what we did is as irreversible as it is unchangeable.



That day on the bridge when I told you I was leaving you, your eyes were watering and your eyeliner was ruined. I didn't shed any tears, but I can't tell you how gutted I felt seeing yours roll down your face. We had opened up about our flaws before, but it was a new horror to see the fear in your eyes that day. I wonder what the people walking past us that afternoon thought. "Are they breaking up?" "Look over there, treehouse in the making." I still hate thinking about how it culminated in that 6th hour of that phone call with me screaming, "I DON'T WANT TO LEAVE YOU. I DON'T WANT TO KEEP DOING THIS TO HIM, I JUST WANT THIS TO STOP."

## HAMMER AND NAIL (OR) SPLINTERS

Sometimes there are no more quips. For once in my life, being with you, I ran out of funny remarks. Sometimes all that's left is breathing. Heavy breathing. Undefined dialogue, rather, an exhibition of visceral haggardness below a surface of screaming and tears. Emotion dragged out of your throat and splattered across the ground where all the other flaws lie.

It was only sometime later that another possibility occurred to me: maybe you did say you liked me back. Maybe you actually did reciprocate it. On that first night that I confessed my feelings for you, as wrong as it was, "Well, so do I," you might have actually said. But when I called you a few days later, you decided to change it. Out of fear, maybe. A casual act of betrayal. "Dude, I swear, I didn't say that. I'm sorry."

Am I telling the story correctly? Was that how it went? Was that as bad as you remember, or did you have a different interpretation?

Not that it mattered. How long did you last, a month? You went through with it anyways. "In another universe," you said. "In another universe. But not this one. We can't. Not with how the way things are." How I wish I knew how badly you wanted to live in both.



I wonder if you can still hear me hammering away at my own treehouse. I wonder if one day it will come crashing down again, like it did with you. Every now and then, I will have useless epiphanies about us.

Arguments, facts, opinions.

Memories, disputes.

Questions.

Evidence.

I'll spin on it, and let them roll on their way.

## Neo Serad

Maybe there was a period of time where it worked.

Where it was just about us, and we didn't have to sneak around him or worry about when he came back from his trip.

But now I have to pull up my own ladder. I have to seal off my own entrance. Maybe I can finally work towards finalising my own treehouse. I am pulling up my ladder, and desperately hoping that I won't make the same mistakes I did with you.

The sky is dark again, only illuminated by lights from the car park. The M1 still drones from kilometres away. And neither of us are coming out.

## BEAUTY BEYOND THE BOX

Siya Gauri Singh

I was just a doll with no feelings, no choices and no rights. I was just a doll who looked very pretty, with standard blue eyes and perfect blonde hair. My pretty clothes and pretty face, my controlled smile and colourful nails. You're pretty, you're beautiful, they tell me.

I'm hollow, I'm fake, I wish to tell them.

I stand in my box, smiling at the world outside. I wish I could break free, I wish I could resist, but I can't and they can't either.

One day a young woman walked past me, only to walk back again. Her dark brown eyes gazed into mine, as though she had found a missing piece. She picks me up, satisfied with herself, putting me in her filled shopping cart. I guess this is it, I have finally been bought. I will see the world beyond the box and find a home.

Beyond the harsh life of the supermarket shelves, maybe I will find a place of acceptance?

The young woman brought me home to a little girl. She was just a little kid, running and dancing with joy. The little kid desperately wanted a new toy. Her mother brought me to her, pulling me out of the box. I thought that was the solution, but alas it was not. Leaving the box was my key to freedom, I had thought, but no, it was not.

There was a bigger prison I was trapped in, I did not realise then, but I pulled the little girl into it, yes, I pulled her into the trap.

The girl was delighted to meet me, growing fonder of me day by day. She twirled my bright hair and started wearing dresses every day. Her mother complimented my blonde hair and blue eyes. She called me very beautiful, but never did she say that to her daughter. Never once did she mention her daughter's gorgeous brown hair, and beautiful brown eyes.

She fell deeper into the trap.

She twirled me in the air, she made me fly among the stars. She kept me close every night, holding on forever tight. She spent more and more time with me, growing almost obsessive. I saw her try to be like me, but I couldn't do anything. I wanted to call out to her, to tell her that she will suffer if she becomes like me. But I couldn't, because I wasn't given a voice.

The girl grew older in a blink of an eye, no longer did she play with dolls. Yet every day before school, she'd look at me with resolve. I hoped that she would forget me, but hope is futile. Every day the girl was getting older, taller, smarter. Every day the girl was changing, getting quieter, sadder and more lost. The bright gleam in her eyes started to disappear, leaving dark shadows behind. She was no longer the sweet girl who loved strange things, but a lost girl who was tied down by strings.

She fell deeper into the trap.

She bleached her luscious brown hair into a pitiful blonde. She no longer braided her hair, like she once loved to do. She looked at me and then in the mirror, the resemblance was growing, both outside and inside. She smiled on the outside, but cried within. She did not smile with joy, but only smiled for them. The resemblance was growing, both outside and inside.

## BEAUTY BEYOND THE BOX

She did what they told her, never questioning once. She never shared her opinion, scared of being hated. She was losing her voice, like I lost mine, but I couldn't do anything. I just saw her sink deeper into the trap. She bought blue contacts, and hid her brown eyes. She was no longer a little girl, but a young woman now. Yet, she still couldn't see that her beauty lies in her brown hair and brown eyes, and not in fake hair and fake eyes. I never had the choice to resist, but she wasn't resisting despite the choice.

She fell deeper into the trap.

She touched me centuries ago, yet looked at me every day. To the world, her eyes seemed placid, but I knew they were fake. Like me. But she couldn't see that I was fake. She thought I was real and I was pretty, but if only I could tell her that I was plastic and hollow. She thought she had to follow me, and not resist me, but if only she knew that resistance was the key.

She thought her blonde hair and blue eyes were her beauty, but her beauty was behind her blue contacts and with her brown hair. She is moving out of the house and packing up all her stuff, a grown woman now. She should leave me behind, after the trap that I pulled her into, but she can't help but pick me up.

She is engulfed into the trap.

We are somewhere else now, it's me and her and him. She is always smiling and I know it's for him. She is no longer human, she has gone numb. She no longer laughs, when she has fun. Oh, how she has grown to resemble me, but when will she realise that this isn't what she wants? She cries, she aches, she knows there is something wrong. Why can't she see the trap, why can't she resist the urge to conform? Why does she listen to what they think is beautiful, why can't she see herself like I see her?



No longer is she a girl, but a doll just like me. A doll with no feelings, no choices and no rights. A doll with standard blue eyes and blonde hair. A doll who has no voice, and a doll who failed to resist. She is just a doll, who reflects society's idea of beauty, but when will she resist and realise that beauty has many shades?

She cannot see a way out of the trap.

She has welcomed a baby, a daughter. She is a mother now. Her daughter has her brown hair and brown eyes, brimming with joy and hope. She is just like her. How quickly the initial days went by, she is now a little girl. The little girl asks for a new toy, and her mother turns to me.

I cannot pull another girl into the trap.

Yet, the mother picks me up after all this time. Her touch felt different, her gaze far worse. Her eyes no longer show affection for me, but some twisted emotions, and she has realised that I was the reason. She puts me down again, and smiles with nostalgia. I had given her some happiness, among the fields of pain, yet she has now realised.

She will resist.

I know she won't give me to her daughter, how glad I am to see. She won't make the same mistake her mother made. She won't give me to her daughter. The girl had become a doll and lost her beauty, but her daughter's eyes sparked something within her. She found her happiness, her beauty. She found it lying behind the blue contacts, and within her chocolate brown tresses.

She praised her daughter for her beauty, her pretty brown eyes and beautiful brown hair. She showed her daughter where her beauty lied, and she escaped the trap. She

## BEAUTY BEYOND THE BOX

resisted, and she succeeded. She taught her daughter something I wanted to teach every girl, but never could. She taught her that her beauty lies in what she was gifted from above, and never from what she saw in others. She was not a plastic doll, and she should never try to be like that.

No one should tell you what beauty looks like. Beauty lies in every shade, in every smile and in every heart. You must find your own beauty.

Smile for yourself, and love your colourful eyes. Embrace your beautiful tresses, and beautiful shining light. For everyone is beautiful, and everyone is unique, you are beautiful and I am just a copy.

## WINE RANSOM

Henry Eather

I watched as the first bottle careened over the cliff edge and sailed past the rocks; a blue glass cylinder sloshing an orange liquid that refracted a green light through the clear sea coloured glass. It continued to descend, gaining speed, and disappearing out of sight, dashing between the sharp rocks that greeted the crashing waves from the sea, entwining together in a jaw of crashing danger.

I listened to see if I could still hear the bottle being cracked open on the pointed trap of nature but wasn't able to perceive anything beyond the changing tides.

I leaned back on the bonnet of the car, my dirty suit rubbing off on the bright shiny red car, a sleek and elegant convertible that had its roof down and a box of identical bottles in the passenger seat. The box was currently down a pair of bottles. An expensive wine which I had won the night earlier. A wine which tasted strongly of a rich earthy flavour and a distinct and interesting saltiness that reminded me all too well of the seaside.

I had originally intended to give the wine out as a gift, but her continued refusal to meet me on even ground had gone unanswered. One of my hands shuffled away into my pocket, removing my flip phone, and tossing it open, seeing the contact list and waiting for any new messages from the one I had intended to meet.

Only the dim lonely blue light shone out at me, nothing of value apart from the empty screen of ignored words and broken promises.

I half-heartedly read through my last text to her.

"Meet me at the north point look out, I've got the wine. I'm going to get rid of it."

The message was a vain, last-ditch effort that came out of the desperation I had to speak with her again. The wine I had won being the last thing I had over her, only now it seemed she had lost any sort of interest in the valuable liquor, something which she had only fought tooth and nail for over the past few weeks.

I chuckled as I plucked another bottle from the case, wrapping my fingers around the top and spinning it through the air, hurling it away from the cliff with a pitchers throw. Watching as it twirled across the sky before falling from its perch amid the clouds and tumbling back down into a dive beneath the waves.

I still held out the vague hope that she'd pick up the call and respond, coming to see me before I had thrown away all the good will I still had left for her, something I really didn't want to do. We still had so many chances left, we'd just

## WINE RANSOM

gotten back together, I had seen our daughter for the first time in years.

But that didn't matter anymore, all because of this stupid wine. I grunted as I grabbed another bottle and pelted it down at my feet, letting the glass shatter and the liquid spill out onto the ground, soaking the battered dancing shoes that I was still wearing. The speckles of blue glass shimmering along the gravel road, stars of the earth that glistened down by my feet.

Why didn't she listen to me? Why couldn't she accept the fact I wanted to make amends? I started to wrestle the rest of the box from the passenger seat, the glass clinking and rattling against one another as the liquid continued swirling within their containers. Hobbling towards the cliff with the box in my hands I lurched forward and threw the entire crate forward, shoving its attachment away from me. Casting the last remnants of my wealth off and letting the glass spill out in a conjoined wave of orange wine and blue glass, forming a waterfall of old memories and broken dreams. Washed away by the ever grasping and swallowing depths of the ocean.

As the bottles continued to fall and break, I felt a scream bubbling inside my lungs, a brewing sensation which I echoed out to the heavens.

Forcing a scream out and letting the world hear that animalistic cry of depravity. A shout that continued until all of it had vanished and I was left standing there. Sweat rolling down the sides of my face, sticking my curly orange hair to the sides of my cheek and pulling all the air I could into my lungs.

It was a final break down of the tumultuous separation that had all but ruined my life on the island. But now that everything had been broken, removed, or similarly damaged in other ugly ways. I felt a new and unfamiliar sensation wrestling its way through me. A levity and lightness that gave me a strange appreciation for the horrible reunion and the divine comedy that had followed.

This levity continued building within my soul until, and I almost couldn't believe this, I started laughing! I started laughing, even after all the horrible life crushing disappointments and I could practically see the amusement in all the ghastly situations.

I started pacing back towards the car, sitting myself down in the driver's seat and wrapping my fingers around the wheel, tracing the imperfect groves and crevices of the plastic.

Everything that had blown up at me was now nothing I needed to shackle

Henry Eather

myself to, I could go wherever I wanted and where I wouldn't have to worry about Sarah, Jamie, Elizabeth and any damn wine that his ex wanted to get her claws into.

I was free at last, and that was something I couldn't be more grateful for.

I pushed the gear shift down into drive and slammed the pedal, spinning the wheel driving out onto the dirt road. The car quickly picking up speed as a cloud of dust appeared in my wake. Heading away from the cliffside where I had discarded what was left of my old life.

## THE WEIGHT WE CARRY

Amelia Verga

Moonlight spilled through the cracked blinds, casting a silhouette of Jason on the wall. A hollow shell of a man who once held so much promise. His snores, a rasp that echoed through the bare bedroom, were the soundtrack to my misery. Each exhale scraped against the raw edges of hope, leaving them frayed and thin. My fingers tightened on the worn photograph clutched in my hand, a snapshot of 15-year-old us, dreams shimmering in our eyes. The dull ache in my heart withered as I knew this life would not change. Tears ran down my cheek, blurring the image in my hand as loneliness coiled around my heart. My gaze drifted to the doorway. I could just leave, but the guilt of leaving my children here kept me imprisoned, two souls depending on us, well me... but yet, the weight of their future pressed heavily on the overflowing laundry basket, and the constant dread of whether Dad was going to come home sober.

The bell rang, ending another chaotic day at my admin job at school. Papers shuffled, and late notes piled up. I hurried out of the office, scanning for my children as I approached the school gate. Finally, I spotted them, Noah's Spiderman backpack slung over his shoulder, and Charlotte's bluey bag was tightly held.

"Hey, you two!" I called out, my voice strained with exhaustion.

As we reached the car, I opened the doors and ushered Noah and Charlotte inside. When we arrived home the sight that greeted me was all too familiar. Jason, sprawled out on the couch as empty chip packets surrounded him. I glanced at him for a moment, then turned my attention to Noah's backpack. As I rummaged through its contents, my fingers brushed against a crumpled piece of paper. Pulling it out, I smoothed the wrinkled paper, my heart sinking as I read the words written in bright, cheery letters:

"Bring Your Father to School Day," I sighed.

"Noah, come back here!" "Why is this crumpled in the bottom of your bag?" I questioned.

## THE WEIGHT WE CARRY

Tears welled up in Noah's eyes as he muttered, "Dad wouldn't want to come..." His voice trembled as he looked back on his deadweight of a father, tears streaming down his cheeks. Noah ran to his room. The telly played loudly, I marched forward I refused to let it hold him captive any longer. My fingers curl around the cord like Jason's lifeline. I yanked it from the socket.

"What the - Val Top gear is on," Jason sneered.

My jaw clenched, my pent-up frustration bursting open.

"Oh top gear is on, that's all you ever do, sit there, ignoring your family while you waste away drinking in front of that screen."

Jason's expression hardened, his eyes peered with resentment.

"Have you even made an effort to find a job like I've asked countless times?" I demanded, the weight of my words hung heavy in the air.

"You know Val, it's not if I get a job or not in this day and age. I'm not going to work a 9-5 and live in this matrix of people who are just run by the government, no I won't stand for it," he scoffed.

"You're right."

"I know I am, finally you're talking sense," Jason replied smugly.

"You're right, you don't stand! You are either on the couch eating your life away or passed out drunk on the porch when I have to drag you inside, but most of all you won't stand for your children, your family!"

I grabbed the fathers day note and shoved it in his face. "You will go, go and show up for your children," I declared as the anger in my voice released.

I found myself once again surrounded by the sound of Jason snoring. Tossing and turning, I caught my eyes finally closing.

## Amelia Verga

But then my phone buzzed with a message, pulling me back to reality. With a heavy sigh, I reached for the device, the glow of the screen projected a harsh light as I read the words on the screen.

0490262785 could be: Andre Portelli

Hey, it's Valerie right? remember me?

my body jolts as I read the name  
Andre? It couldn't be.

Hi yeah who r u ?

It's Andre, forgot I had your number still, I'm sure you'd remember me?

Oh yes....I think I remember

I Had been with Jason since when I was fifteen years old, but around a year into our relationship I was searching for more, so I started talking to this Italian boy online. Andre was smart, handsome but also a step I didn't take.

*Was sixteen, walking through the lively streets of the Italian festival on Lygon street with Andre. I felt a sense of excitement and connection to heritage that I hadn't experienced: Being half Italian, I had always felt a longing to explore my cultural roots. Surrounded by the sights and sounds of Italy, I felt a sense of belonging. Andre's conversations were effortlessly engaging. He had a way of making me feel like the most important person in the world.*

*We stumbled upon a group of dancers performing a spirited tarantella. I couldn't resist joining in, feeling the rhythm of the dance course through my veins. But as the music swirled around us Andre leaned in and kissed me. But as I leaned forward a shot of guilt went through me. "I can't, I'm sorry" I pushed forward to leave. He stopped me holding my hand. "It's him isn't it" Andre shook his head in disappointment "Valerie, take this chance...with me" he pleaded.*

*The tension of the stolen kiss hung heavy in the air between us. It was a mistake, a betrayal of everything I thought I wanted but Yet, a part of me knew that this kiss*



## THE WEIGHT WE CARRY

*could be the start of something much bigger than two sixteen-year-olds at a festival, but in doubt, I pulled away.*

A plethora of parents came in to bring-your-father-to-school-day. "Hello good afternoon, enjoy!" I smiled as I greeted the parents to let them into the school. Ten minutes. Ten excruciating minutes had crawled by, I checked my phone to see the sight of Andre's message, and there it was, a redemption... a chance to escape.

"Why don't we go for dinner, I'm available tomorrow?" I looked at the message as my heart started to race.

Then I remembered what was important so I looked back at the clock. Jason, Where was Jason? His empty promise, sealed with the others, It wasn't about me, not this time, this was about Noah.

Another set of parents approached.

"Welcome!" I forced out, my voice strained, the smile a brittle mask threatening to crack. I had enough, I told my co-worker "Agh forgot to return these" I mumbled, grabbing a forgotten stack of permission slips, this was my escape.

As I hurried past Noah's classroom, peeking through the window, I sighed. There he was Noah, sat on a table by himself, watching the fathers laugh with their children. His eyes usually sparked with mischief, now were clouded with an ache of disappointment. Other children, clinging to their fathers legs or proudly displaying their crafts, seemed oceans away from Noah's lonely island. Jason, the man who helped create this life, had stolen a piece of his innocence: a piece I couldn't replace. Wiping away a tear, I knew what I had to do. Pushing the door open I went to go be there for Noah. His eyes widened in surprise and his cheeky smile returned as I knelt beside him. He excitedly wrapped his arms around me. I built a different kind of perspective for Noah. I could not be enough to mend the broken pieces but was strong enough to build a fortress around his heart.

The rumble of Jason's snores vibrated through the mattress, how could he just sleep? He left his son to live another day drunk in front of the TV, a familiar weight settled on my chest, but beneath it, an anger inside of me rose for a desperate need for

Amelia Verga

change. Andre's invitation, a dinner date could be an answer, but not even Prince Charming could save us now. Hours went on, my heart ached as my body laid there, I needed to be the change to save us. As my body ached from the restless tossing,

Finally, a scream trapped in my throat, I lashed out.

"Jason! Get out!" I shoved him, He blinked awake,

"What the hell, Valerie?"

"Don't you 'what the hell' me!" My voice cracked, but my anger behind it held firm.

"You get out of my house!"

"I can't believe you're doing this," he slurred, reaching for his discarded clothes.

I wasn't done. I shouted, "You haven't earned the right to be a father, You haven't earned the right to stay here!"

He muttered under his breath as the slam of the front door echoed like a gunshot.

Silence.

There was only the refrigerator's hum, no more drunken slurs or even his snores. Tonight, there was peace. For the first time in months I wasn't just Valerie, the struggling mother. Tonight, I was free.

I laid on my bed, the weight on my chest lifted, replaced by a single fragile hope. The air had felt lighter, as the weight of Jason's neglect had finally lifted. Noah's laughter had echoed through the halls, Charlotte for the first time in weeks had skipped to the kitchen: the decision to kick Jason out had been agonising, but it had been my choice.

Tonight had been our date, a chance to rediscover a part of myself I'd buried beneath the weight of responsibility. Excitement had burst as I had pulled out a dress I hadn't worn in years. For the first time in a while, I had asked for help so Sarah, my sister,

## THE WEIGHT WE CARRY

had promised to watch Noah and Charlotte.

Sarah had smiled, "Finally getting your groove back V ." I had returned a smile.

"Mummy, where are you going?" Noah had asked as I applied mascara.

"Just going to see an old friend, Sarah will be here to play pirates with you and Charlotte, alright?" I had reassured him.

The tram had travelled through the city, as I peered out the window, a bunch of Italian flags throughout Lygon Street memory had struck me, the day of the Italian festival, years ago when Andre then had been charming and attentive. A bitter smile had touched my lips. Today, Lygon Street held a different promise.

The tram had arrived at the next stop, announcing "Lygon Street." This is where I needed to get off to see Andre, but is this the step I need to take?

So I stayed put.

Tonight, I rewrote the narrative.

Sorry my kids are not feeling well, have to reschedule x

The tram had continued its journey, leaving Lygon Street behind. I had found myself at a quiet corner restaurant. Sitting by the window, a glass of wine swirling in my hand, I had revealed the unexpected joy of my own company. This had been freedom – the freedom to choose my path, to rediscover myself.

As I looked in the reflection of the window before me a woman radiating confidence with a contagious smile had said "Hello, old friend".

## CORPSES AND THE SOIL

Nivedya Prasanth

I have never seen cheeks so sullen,  
Eyes so hollow,  
As those in the land where even the summer sun appears dull.

A species of those who hurt but are never hurt,  
Who see beauty but wave it off,  
Who look past pain with nothing but mere disconcert.

It is astonishing,  
One of the Universe's most cruel and befuddling mysteries,  
How children with sunflowers for eyes and roses for cheeks turn into something so  
diminishing.

Fingers that once danced past piano keys, sweet morning grass and mess of all kinds,  
Danced through crisp night air and attempted to grasp clouds,  
Transform into ones chained with such binds.

Smiles that sprouted from fellow grins, jolly music and a cold swim,  
Laughs that erupted from hideous made-up faces and the smell of fresh cookies,  
Become mouths terrifyingly grim...

Like they had never appreciated the ethereal bliss of being drunk on life,  
As if they were no more than just ghosts of the giddy souls that inhibited them once  
ago,  
Souls that lived lives without fear, embarrassment, second thought and strife.

Alas! Yet, they still march on,  
Soldiers bred up for labour, void of love and feeling,  
All tenderness and ardour gone.

## CORPSES AND THE SOIL

Perhaps they are blind,  
Or simply do not learn to question their own change,  
Continuing with an impossibly one tracked, unemotional mind.

I ask of the eternally luminous sun, ever-patient stars and the all seeing moon  
To mercifully spare some light to soften their gazes and melt away their iron wall  
eyes,  
To show them light, love and endearment and lull them to dreamless sleep with the  
softest tune.

After all, they were once children with hearts full of dreams and hope,  
It would be a crime against nature to not restore that,  
To not try to bring back Mother Earth's children who forgot themselves while trying  
to cope.

We are, including those corpses, all set into the soil below us to love and be loved,  
Enjoy the world's wonders and create our own,  
To treasure the warmth of our kin, our future, our neighbours and our beloved.

It seems like a crime to do anything other than that.  
And why would we?  
When the air is so sweet, children and lovers sweeter and beauty around us is fact.

So I beg for those corpses to awaken,  
Look around in awe and find beauty in the small nooks and crannies,  
And realise the loveliness they ought to never mistaken.

Wake,  
Take in all you are missing out on  
And be joyous of the world you were given and not think for once, of ways it could  
break.

## DAY

Lyra Chen

Fox bounded across the blue sky,  
Graceful, majestic.  
His tail came off in thick white wisps, and a new tail grew.

Rabbit, golden yellow, joined Fox.  
Warmth emanated from her,  
Hopping, leaping, chased by playful Fox.  
It was time.  
Rabbit descended slowly down, into the canopy of trees.

A beautiful Owl, white and grey,  
Flew through the trees smoothly, into the sky, and hooted.  
A midnight-blue Serpent followed, curling, twisting.  
Places where his tail flicked, dark blue spots appeared.  
He stretched like a blanket and engulfed the sky.  
Serpent's iridescent white scales glittered, like fireflies.

Fox floated around the sky, and Rabbit, as bright as ever, emerged from the trees.  
Owl opened her wide white eyes,  
Ruffled her dappled grey-white feathers,  
Then she and Serpent retreated into the forest.  
Rabbit leaped into position, a little above Fox.

Another day began.

## A SUNSET OF GLAD AND SORRY

Aishwarya Yarravajhala

The sun dies over the mossy mountains  
Giving up for the night  
The waterfall cascades down like fountains  
And the land is no more bright

*The breeze is sweet, like honey  
The evening warmth, pleasant  
The sky still sunny  
Peace is here at present*

Darkness overwhelms us  
And the glad days are no more  
The sun has finally set and thus,  
My heart can't fly anymore

*I see the stars, the moon  
Not the absence of light  
My heart sings a melody, a tune  
On this beautiful night*

## TWO SHOTS

Samiha Rukayat

Maddie

You think you'd know what a killer is like.

You think you'd know that when you've investigated murder cases or read books centred around a killer's perspective. Not that you'd find many, anyway.

But I'm not like that.

I'm different because I know what being a part of the mafia is like.

I don't need a book to describe what I know and feel.

Mike

How did the events that followed Maddie's missing brother go? There's none better than me to say it.

I'm a notorious mafia, part of the Cosa Nostra, one of the largest still-in-operation mafias in the world. Located in Italy, to be precise. So, naturally, when I found out that Maddie's older brother, Jake, went missing, I went for my number-one suspect: his best friend, Juliette.

Only the pebbles would weep with Juliette as she lay on the floor, surrounded by my gang and I. Maddie stood out of the room; as the only girl in the group, she didn't have the heart to torture another. "*A sister doesn't torture a sister,*" she had said.

Maddie clearly had a lot of learning to do.

Towering over Juliette, I relished her cries for help and I knew she would be next on my wall of victims. It was traditional for me to make a card of my victims and then put them up on the wall. '*Obviously,*' I would often add when explaining it. Everyone knew that, *obviously*. It's been going on for years now, *obviously*. I'm the leader of our gang, *obviously*.

Juliette begged for mercy, but I spared her none. I could see my reflection in her forever-open green eyes, cold-headed on the outside but really a struggling person on the inside. And my struggles were different because they were about Maddie.



## TWO SHOTS

*Stand straight, clear your eyes like a person who has no secrets, kid.* My secrets were for me only, and no one could see them. Not even Maddie. Especially not Maddie.

I just hoped she would never find out.

### Maddie

I wandered around, Juliette's screams ringing in my ears, and I knew she would be the next card up on *his* wall of victims. That was tradition; he would create cards of his victims and put them up on his wall. I had seen some of them; helpless ladies and men either tortured to death or had met their fate to the mercy of a bullet or two. Usually one. *Oh, hey, look, my parents-*

A bolt of shock crept through my spine. It wasn't quick. I could hear it more than I could feel it; the rush of adrenaline, the wind that almost knocked me out. I stood, gaping at the photos of my parents: the same parents who had been murdered. On Mike's wall of victims.

*Names: Unknown???*

*Age: 25 & 23*

*Death: Two shots to the chest*

*Reason for death: Debt*

They knew. Everyone here knew, but they didn't tell me. And Mike...Mike also knew. He didn't tell me that it had been him who had killed my parents. I didn't know who killed them, so it was always me, killing them because I wasn't old enough to work or to help them pay off the debts. Killing them because I was only five, and it was only me who could have killed them with my young age and the guilt of everything. *They weren't the killers, I was.*

Well, at least it took two shots, not one, to kill them. It meant they survived longer.

I wanted, more than anything, to break down right there and then, to rage and scream at him, to save Juliette and tell her that it wasn't her fault my brother was missing, to tell my parents I wasn't angry at them for dying and leaving me for the dead, to tell them I loved them. But I couldn't. *If he found out I knew, I would be dead.*

## Samiha Rukayat

As good as.

Fifteen years of trust and memories evaporated, leaving before me a stranger.

But a part of me, a smaller part, was telling me that I should escape without being noticed. Then I could leave this terrible gang I got myself into and finally have a proper life.

And I listened to the smaller voice.

### Mike

As I sketched out the card, I didn't hear the distant *bang* of the door or the sudden cool that flooded the room for only a second before disappearing and mixing with the warm air of our base. My mind had gone back to Maddie, as it always did; the expression on her face when she found out would break me, I knew, no matter how hard I tried to keep a cool front.

When had things started to go this wrong? Well, I knew the point that things went downhill was when I decided to become a mafia, like the rest of my family – rather when things started going wrong in my mind.

*It hadn't.*

This was all me, everything was me. I chastised myself for even thinking that it wasn't me, for everyone had a role to play in a story – except I didn't know what mine was. Villain or hero, I don't know.

For all I know, I might be the villain in Maddie's life right now. That was a mean thought. Everybody meant good, didn't they?

I don't know about me, though.

### Maddie

The soles of my shoes pounded against the rough concrete, my breath in staccato beats, each one short-lived and causing a searing stitch in my side. I wondered how long I had been running – ten seconds or ten minutes. Anything to get away from that awful building and those appalling memories.

--

## TWO SHOTS

*Crack.*

I turned, rigid and unwilling.

I knew that sound.

A gun.

*Crack.*

*Death: Two shots to the chest.*

*Crack.*

A signal now.

Mike knew I was gone. He must have heard me slam the door because three shots to the sky meant he was launching a search. He said so himself on my first day; *Three shots in the air means I'm launching a search.*

But, looking up, I see that even the sky has changed somehow. It was stained a deep blue, the occasional white stain of a cloud adding a touch of elegance to one's normal day. But to me, it seemed anything but elegant. Menacing. What was it again? Ah, yes, a kind of *slap-me-in-the-face* kind of blue.

I was wasting time, something that wasn't on my side. So I pushed myself up, steeling through the pain I was already going through. Fast-walking. Jogging. Running. Then, an extra pair of footsteps fell into rhythm with mine.

*Crack.*

I fell onto the ground.

*Crack.*

The sky darkened and exploded.

*Crack.*

I gasped for air.

*Crack.*

My vision went black.

Samiha Rukayat

Mike

I've never seen Maddie in this state before.

I've never imagined we would ever be like this, me towering above her, a small trickle of blood snaking down her lips.

I also never imagined Maddie to stand her ground as solidly as she does now.

"You killed them," she said to me, her voice devoid of any emotion.

I levelled my voice to match hers and told a lie untrue. "I feel no remorse."

"You didn't tell me."

"I couldn't bring myself to."

Maddie blinked in confusion and I looked right back at her, unfazed. I had been taught to get through situations like this. *Don't back down, son.*

"Why?" Maddie breathed.

Maddie

When Mike didn't reply, I asked again. "Why?"

He scratched the back of his head. "Because..." he faltered, and I thought I had him there until he started speaking again. "...I wanted to. I was bored."

My heart pounded in my chest, and I wasn't able to process everything. This was coming too fast, too suddenly, too...painfully.

"What?"

Again, Mike scratched the back of his head, just as I thought he would. "I...I wanted to do something in the family business. So...I took the gun and did it."

"You...killed my parents?" I ask softly.

"Yes, and," he hesitated. "Now that you found out..."

I don't need him to finish, because I already know what it is.

"You're going to kill me."

## TWO SHOTS

Mike

Guilt surges through me at Maddie's words, but I must do it. To protect myself and to keep this organisation going. If Maddie told the authorities, it would ruin everything.

"Your brother died because of me, too," I admit quietly, daring a look at Maddie. Big mistake. This was so much harder now. I gathered my courage and pulled out the gun, tilted my head. *That's the best way to end them all, son.*

So I did it.

*Crack.*

*Crack.*

She stumbled, knees first, then the rest of her body following suit.

This must be the absolute worst way to die. Dignified till the end. Killed by your best friend.

Like parents, like daughter.

## A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Sanjay Krishna Paruchuri

The dried leaves softly crunched and rustled under my practiced paws as I followed a fresh game trail. I knew that tonight I would return to my cubs with a bountiful meal. I padded softly through the growth of the forest, carefully picking my way through the underbrush. Game was scarce these days, as more predators began entering the forest. The plants also diminished at the arrival of these new predators, becoming less dense and wilting. They were two-legged, travelling in packs, with shiny, stick-shaped tools that emitted a loud noise and pungent smell when used. These tools would kill whatever they pointed at, leaving no opportunity for the prey to fight back. The predators only occasionally took the carcass with them, more often leaving the dead animal to rot. I never touched the carcasses, as the pungent smell lingered over it, reminiscent of its last moments. Whenever I went to hunt, I saw branches that had been hacked off, and trees that had been tipped over. Though they had not seen me yet, their scent was unmistakable and intimidating, the smell of burnt wood. I knew that fires were just about the worst risk to the forest, as one small spark could eventually lead to a deadly inferno. I learnt not to go near these places, as the forest never flourished with life wherever they were.

The trail eventually led to the river. It was almost two trees wide, softly flowing over rocks that it had smoothed over time. It was a quiet, soothing place during the night where the game came to drink.

Not tonight, though.

As I neared the river, my sharpened eyes noticed movement more than ten paces ahead of me. A herd of deer were drinking from the river, the fawns huddled next to their mothers while they had their fill of water. I cautiously swept my eyes over the herd, shrinking slowly into a bush, looking for the ideal prey. As I crept closer, a slight breeze swept in the direction of the deer from me. The herd's ears pricked up at my scent and they began panicking. I knew that I couldn't hesitate a second longer and so I hurtled at the herd, singling out a young, healthy-looking buck at the rear, scraping the velvet on its antlers on a tree. I knew it would put up a tough fight, but I was eager for a meal. Before it rushed away, I launched myself at the deer as it flung its hooves up at me, I felt a gust of wind brush against my whisker, and the surge of adrenaline as my instincts kicked in. If that blow landed, it would have spelled doom for me. Snarling, I swiped back at the deer, knowing that now if I made a mistake, it

## A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

would mean a severe injury, or worse - death. Snorting with fear, it prepared to rush at me. Swerving to the side, I bit its neck, severing its windpipe and ending its struggle mercifully. The rest of the herd sprinted away for their lives.

I watched as the life in the buck's deep, beautiful black eyes faded away, its gaze never leaving mine. I honoured the fight it gave even though death was imminent.

Remembering the hunger of my cubs, I hauled the carcass home. As I neared, my two cubs rushed out, greeting me. They then noticed the deer carcass, and at once they pounced on it, gnawing at whatever they could reach. What was left of the deer would suffice for a day or two more. After our hunger was sated, we huddled together for warmth and eventually sleep took us into its calm embrace.

As the new day approached, I taught my cubs how to follow trails and broken branches to find prey. I cautioned them against going near the places that smelt of burnt wood. After this, they began play fighting, I didn't interrupt, as I knew that as they aged, the skills they learned from this would prove useful.

More signs of the predators began appearing, such as charred patches of the ground where blackened pieces of wood lay. Patches of strong-smelling liquid darkened the dirt, reeking worse than rotting fruit. Its smell made my mind lazy and fuzzy. Cloth dens surrounded the charred remains. As I turned to leave, a rustle sounded behind me, followed by strange calls.

"Harry, do you hear that? I reckon something's trying to creep up to our camp!"

"This cursed forest! Get your gun out, Frank, be ready for anything."

The rustling grew louder, until two of the two-legged predators emerged from the bushes, brandishing their loud death-sticks at me. I snarled, trying to scare them with my fangs. Their eyes widened; they didn't seem ready to attack me.

"Harry! It's a tiger! A massive one, too!"

"Fire some shots at the sky, it should scare it away, and then we'll follow its tracks to its den with the others and dispose of it, this will be big money, Frank!"

The wide-eyed predators' death-sticks roared at the sky, striking fear into me. I rushed into the cover of the bushes, fearing a death where I would be helpless to change the outcome. Though I could smell the fear of the predators, my fear of the death-sticks was too great to confront them.

I ran until my den was in sight, and the cubs rushed out to greet me as usual, the sight of them safe and content calmed my precarious mood. Fortunately, the predators didn't seem to have pursued me. We finished the remains of the deer and went to the river. We swam around, trying to catch fish, growling when one escaped our grasp. Afterwards, we lay at the edge of the lake, lazing under the warmth of the sun, which was just beginning to set. As we walked back to our den, I forgot about the predators, relishing the time I spent with my cubs. I marvelled at their growth over the past few weeks, they were almost a third of my length.

As we came closer to the den, I noticed the pungent smell that usually lingered over the carcasses that the two-legged predators killed. I abruptly had the feeling that we were being watched. I grabbed the cubs' napes in my mouth and bounded to our den, my instincts telling me that danger was near. The smell grew stronger as the den grew closer. A death-stick roared, and the ground beside me exploded. I snarled, and ran as fast as I could, caring for nothing but the safety of my cubs. Suddenly, it seemed the air itself was filled with the roar of death-sticks. Pain shot up my left hind leg, slowing me for a moment. Snarling, I pushed on, feeling the warm blood trickling along my leg, trying to ignore the constant waves of pain washing over me.

Finally, when I reached the den, I placed the cubs on the ground, but with a sense that I was falling from an unimaginable height, I saw my cubs with gaping wounds from the death-sticks, lying still and lifeless. Grief washed over me, turning into a blind rage, I forgot all about my wound, only focused on avenging my cubs. With a roar, I launched myself at the two-legged predators. Three more wounds appeared on my forelegs as I swiped at them, and with a resounding thud, one fell, never to get up again. Blood pooled underneath me as the wounds sapped my strength. Snarling, I fell onto my side, knowing that my life was coming to an end.

The two-legged predators gathered around the edges of my dimming vision, they cheered as they saw me, lying there. There were more here than when I previously met them. With a final deafening, triumphant roar of the death-stick, my vision went black, and with a sense of deep peace, I knew I would be reunited with my cubs.



## ASCENDING PEBBLE

Momina Khan

I can't do anything.

I lay awash, on the shore of my mind, each soaring wave bringing in a new train of thought. One more reason why they hated me, another reason I didn't fit the mould, and the skies of grey and indigo seemed to mix together into one heavy blue, the capture of my sadness.

Thing is, an urge couldn't stop passing through my mind. This thought of what would happen if I simply didn't exist. If I ceased to be here. Though the concept was far, for it was something I would only experience at old age, or by accident, I pondered over the idea.

At first, it was like a pebble I had to carry with me everywhere. It didn't stop me from doing the things I liked; drawing, learning, and laughing over jokes about the way the boys walked in the class with my friends. But each day, the weight increased. My back hunched, my mind seemed to follow the same path, and eventually my thoughts became a boulder, leaving shameful scars upon my body. And I thought then maybe people will notice me. They'll help, and my friends will take this arduous affliction off my chest. But as time progressed, in my mind they only started to hate me more, adding to my ever growing pain.

And this feeling of ingrained everyday sadness and longing for non-existence consumed me. I thought about reaching for help. But every close knock on the counsellor's door ended in me running away promptly, books in hand and rushing to my next class.

Today though, is a day I feel I cannot stand it any longer.

So I'm going to take a leap of faith.

Knock! Knock!

Kit, the counsellor, opens the door, and I sit silently, facing her body. She places her pen down, and her legs fold on the matcha green chair.

Tears climb up the insides of me and pour out to my cheeks, and I let the cat out of the bag.

“I want to kill myself because I feel like I don’t belong.”

Saying it felt surreal, like I was spectating my body as a member of an audience; or like a photographer for a film and I was the confused actor in a movie. I let out a sigh, and took in everything. The colours of the pale canary walls and the vibrant shades of pink on Kit’s vase, enhanced by the sunlight. The rays of light shimmering through the window, blurring Kit’s vision though she looked at me with this sense of knowing and care in her eyes, like nothing I could say would make her hate me; nothing would make me feel out of place in her office. And then I started talking.

And the boulder began to feel a bit less heavy.

I know one day I’ll have nothing to carry at all.

## POISONED LOVE

Jashmine Marasini

Click, click, click. The sound of my heels were quickly drowned out by the chatter and energy in the room. Glasses clinked, guests laughed, music flowed all throughout, filling the -already full- ballroom. Rich brown hues swirled across the walls, as exquisite petals floated, leaving a faint scent far lovelier than the fragrances all these people wore. I strutted towards the most crowded area within this majestic place. The bar. Sitting down on a nearby bench, I hunched over, shot a smile at the bartender, but to my surprise, shot a frown back while the glistening tune of the cocktail shaker could be heard as she shook it. Her long dark cocoa plait trailed down her back, slightly swaying side to side as she placed the shaker down. My smile quickly faded as I spotted the *Star* on her arm. The black ink making its appearance on the caramel-coloured canvas.

\*\*\*

From a distance I had seen the shadows. A woman, now sitting across from me was enveloped in swirls of baby blue silk, her white shawl gently draped over her shoulders and waist. Twinkling jewels adorning her ears, neck, wrist and waist made their appearance as the light shone upon them. It was as if gods himself had opened the gates of the heavens and she had leapt out. She looked like an angel. From the corner of my eye as I continued shaking, I noticed that tendrils of inky shadows surrounded the girl, marking her as something far from angelic. A Murderer. Instinctively, I reached out to trace the *Star*.

\*\*\*

From the way she traced *it*, she had definitely seen my shadows. Trying to clear my throat, I looked into her eyes, 'May I have two glasses of the strongest whiskey you have?' Bouncing my leg lightly, I made a pleading expression, trying to convey an act of innocence.

\*\*\*

Jashmine Marasini

With each kill a person makes, their shadow around them becomes darker. Very few are gifted with the sight to see these shadows. People like me. People marked with the *Star*.

She had probably killed multiple people; I shouldn't be serving this woman. There was a reason the *Star* was marked on my arm, so people could know that I can identify these bastards. With a low yet quiet growl, while leaning over I asked.

'How many again?'

\*\*\*

*'How many again?'*

I knew she wasn't talking about the drinks. I flicked my golden locks to the side, as my slender finger tapped against the wood, echoing out a small baritone.

'26, soon to be 27 because....' I trailed off. Her eyes widened and she clutched onto the edge of the counter, knuckles turning snow-white. As quickly as she reacted, she relaxed her body, shot me a smile, and rapidly handed over two glasses of whiskey. Before I could snatch them, she reached out and took a hold of my wrist.

\*\*\*

I looked into her dainty eyes as I whispered, 'Don't ever come back, please.' Visible relief washed over her face as she nodded and slipped a tiny diamond into my palm, winking amongst the dim lights. *Thank you* she mouthed before sashaying away.

\*\*\*

## POISONED LOVE

I straightened up in my chair, bouncing my leg on the ground. Darting my eyes from side to side to try and find her. Suddenly I was met with striking ocean hues. It was her. Elaine. My heart pounded in my body as she strutted towards me, a smile on her face, hands full as they held two cups of swirling, brown hues.

‘Shall we go somewhere more private for our....drink?’ she questioned, as she passed one over to me. Butterflies swarmed in my stomach as I processed her - possibly- provocative words.

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Despite the confident tone in my voice, my legs were weak. I barely managed a smile as we exited the ballroom together, heading towards the darker areas of the gardens.

\*\*\*

She seemed a bit jittery, perhaps first-kiss nerves? Moonlight poured in, surrounding her body in an ethereal glow as she stood near the rose bushes. My breath was swept away from my lungs, heart still pounding in my chest, while a bubbly feeling rushed throughout my body. Is this what love feels like?

\*\*\*

I looked at him, his dark inky hair, seeming to absorb the light within the garden. We were alone.

‘Marco,’ I breathed, ‘I...I...you should have your drink...It’s really nice.’ I slightly urged, stammering. I had slipped in the poison as soon as I could, shielding it from any prying eyes who may have noticed. Yet, I couldn’t bear the guilt which clawed in my stomach. I shouldn’t be feeling this way...

\*\*\*

My eyebrows scrunched together, *Why is she so eager to get me drinking?* I thought. An icy finger trailed down my back about...all of this, but I quickly brushed it off. 'She's an angel, she would never do such a thing..' I murmured to myself, as I took a swig of the whiskey. Burning brown embers trailed down my throat, and I closed my eyes to relish the feeling. Pleasure, soon quickly morphed into fear as I clawed at my throat, my body screaming for air.

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I saw the way he grabbed his throat, desperate for a breath. Tears slid down my cheeks as I did the only thing I could do. Watch. His face was slowly turning blue. As he put the pieces of the puzzle together, the words, the drinks, everything, he looked at me with a horrified expression.

'I'm sorry, it was the only way...' I softly spoke. His pinpoint pupils widened at my confession while his body trembled. As he tried to open his mouth to speak, his eyes closed once more, and he fell. The wind shocked by my actions, froze. The grass stood still beneath his body. My face was still wet. The silence was deafening. A pathetic mewl left my mouth as I opened it again to fill the silence.

'I'm sorry.'

## THE WILLOW TREE

Sasandhi Sirinayaka

As an autumn breeze swiftly made its way through town, Willow's final leaf slowly fell to the ground. The sounds of joy filled the air followed by the faint sounds of church bells. While the others displayed their vivid red and orange leaves, Willow waited until she was noticed. She stood there leafless but peaceful, lonely yet patient. Willow stared at the kids who kept climbing the trees, and those who whined to stay. She wondered whether anyone still cared for her.

When Willow was just a seedling, she remembered how she was adored by the little kids. They always attended to her needs, although sometimes they over-watered her. However when she grew, kids came to play soccer in the open fields near the church. The soccer ball zoomed from one end to another, until it finally came at her. Still to this day, the scar remains on her.

As the days dragged into weeks, Willow had little faith in her. She knew that if she wasn't visited enough, she would be cut down. With fear of death following her, it was hard to attract little kids over. It was even worse when she had no leaves on her to dazzle someone. Willow could see that the builders were pointing at her and were talking about her. They then made their way over towards her.

Sasandhi Sirinayaka

The faint low grumble of the chainsaw came closer to Willow. She squinted her eyes closed, as fear overtook her. Heart pounded against her trunk, feeling like it would burst out of her. She could now feel the chainsaw hit her hip. It burned so badly, making it impossible for her to ignore it. Thump! Finally, Willow was split into two. She laid there, thinking about herself in heaven, where she would come back here and have a better life. Then, she took her last look around the park. At last she saw the church and closed her eyes.

After years of Willow's death, her trunk still remains there. But it has changed. Out of her trunk was a small yet beautiful small tree, with flowers that soon would bear fruits. Remember that things with a heart, but is ugly, are more valuable than those without a heart. After death, they will always return in a better form, but with the same heart they first came to earth with.



## MOONLIGHT

Rehet Kaur Grewal

Glistening, glowing, glittering bright

Sitting lovingly in the smooth, black sky

Night opens her marble eye

Accompanied by an army of stars,

Watching people near and far

Vast green forest spread out below,

Racing tidal waves putting on a show

Smothering her hand over the earth,

Glistening, glowing, glittering bright.

Night opens her marble eye

## LITTLE YELLOW BIRD

Ee Lyn Teh

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
Why are you injured?  
I hope you aren't that hurt.

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
What's wrong with your wing?  
Sorrowful tunes are what you sing.

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
Can you fly?  
Oh no, please don't cry!

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
Ouch! What a big wound it is.  
A bandage would be such a bliss!

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
You are not broken,  
Just a little shaken.

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
Now that you have recovered,  
I know how much you have suffered.

## LITTLE YELLOW BIRD

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
I think it's time to give it a try.  
Can you maybe soar into the sky?

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
Now that you are flying high,  
Can you see my admiring eye?

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
Oh, please don't go!  
I liked to see you grow.

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
I sometimes hear you singing.  
Music in my ears ringing!

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
It makes me wonder how it feels to be a bird.  
I hope your songs can be heard!

Little yellow bird, little yellow bird,  
I will miss you, my friend.  
I hope our friendship will never end!

## FIRE

Kiaan Bhatia

As the ferocious wind blew,  
A spark grew,  
People looked up to see a beast,  
Maybe it had come to feast,  
Ash filled the air,  
Along with people's despair,  
It consumed everything in its way,  
From shelters to bay,  
The sky breathed smoke,  
Animals suffered from its choke,  
Flames crept away,  
As strangers made way,  
Animals yelped,  
As people helped,  
The community shared,  
Some lives were spared.

## EXCITEMENT

Ee Lyn Teh

Excitement is like seeing a huge rainbow in the sky,  
Beautiful colors swirling all around you.  
It smells of flowers blooming while you walk through,  
And it tastes like colorful gummy bears and jellies.

Excitement is like digging in your garden,  
And accidentally finding a piece of lost treasure.  
A jewel, a ruby or a pearl,  
A gem that only you to uncover.

Excitement is like waking up on your usual Monday morning,  
But then you realize it is your birthday.  
It also feels like Christmas morning,  
Where unwrapping presents is all you can think of.

Excitement is like playing a game of tag,  
Chasing around the playground with your friends.  
Giggling and laughing out loud,  
Hoping you never get tagged.

Ee Lyn Teh

Excitement is like hanging upside down on the monkey bars,  
Doing back-flips, front-flips and even cartwheels on the ground.  
Having your friends cheering you on,  
What a way to have awesome fun!

Excitement is like doing fun sports you enjoy,  
Ice skating where you can do a one-foot spin!  
Swimming, diving and even doing a torpedo drill.  
Skiing in the snow, doing a toboggan race.  
Rock climbing and bouldering, seeing the whole place from above.

Excitement makes me happy!

## THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH

Syeda Aamnah Ahmed

A kangaroo leaps by with a joey in its pouch,  
An echidna slumps by in a very grumpy slouch.  
A family of koalas hanging out in the trees,  
Leaves float by, riding the gentle breeze.  
An emu comes by, feathers ruffled by the wind,  
Enjoying the summer day on a nice weekend.  
A crackle of cockatoos flying high above,  
Flying around spreading kindness and love.

## THE TWO BUGS

Anastasia Orescovich

Once upon a time, there were two little bugs named Flower, a pretty lady bug with a shiny scarlet red shell and Grass, a restless grasshopper. They both had beautiful houses and shops.

Flower sold food for other bugs to eat and stock up in the winter. Grass sold toys, keeping a graph on which of the toys were sold the most.

The bugs were in a constant battle to sell more. The fighting would always get worse when the annual shop competition arrived.

They met one beautiful spring afternoon when the festival was in full swing. Posters were everywhere, trying to stay stuck on the walls as the gentle breeze would slowly unstick them. Grass cleared his throat, catching Flower's attention.

"If you are going to say one more time that your shop has more customers than me, I swear I'm going to bake you into a pie the next time I see you", Flower said.

Grass smiled sweetly (not that he was actually that sweet!) and answered: "Actually that's what I was going to say: "My customers are coming more often than yours."

Flower walked back to her shop to rearrange the stock, grumbling... "Those people, always messy." Then she had an idea. She thought: "Maybe, copying Grass' prices will be fun!", she smiled happily.

She sneaked into the shop while Grass was out to take in some more fresh air, noted all the prices, sneaked out, and replaced her food prices with Grass'. "Hehehe, this will be fun."

The very next day, Grass walked up to her, furious. She quickly switched to arranging crates, like she didn't notice he was coming. Grass asked her: "Did you copy my prices???!!!"



## THE TWO BUGS

Flower replied: "Well, yeah, but does it really matter? Cause' I now have even more customers."

Grass turned as red as a cherry tomato before stomping off.

For the next what seemed like ten days, they stole each other's ideas, blamed each other, and stole each other's ideas again. It seemed like madness until the fifteenth day of the festival when Flower returned home. She noticed the door open and she said "I don't remember leaving this open..."

She went inside, shut the door behind her and got a jump scare when she saw Grass sitting on one of the chairs. "WHAT!!!" She screamed, but Grass looked at her curiously. "Sorry, I just saw the door open...anyways, I was thinking, if we're to win, we need to merge shops..."

He paused, because he was sure that Flower wouldn't agree, so he was surprised when Flower hugged him. "Yes, YES! THANK YOU SO MUCH! I have a lot of empty space in my shop, people always ask me why it's there, so you can put your toys in that space." She dashed out of the door so quickly that Grass was left alone in the empty house.

Grass put his shop up for sale and took the toys boxes to Flower's shop. She helped him with everything, cleaned the space, helped Grass carry and arrange his little toys. In the end, they skyrocketed in sales and bug folks were asking how come they now were working together. Grass kindly responded: "It's alright, it's only temporary."

On the final day of the competition, when the winner was supposed to be announced, Flower and Grass were at home feeling a bit nervous, taking their time to cook their breakfast, so they ended up getting there a tad late. Everyone was having fun, clinking glasses and chatting and cheering.

When it was time for the announcement, everyone fell silent. Even Grass and Flower were holding their breaths. After the announcer said a couple of words, he let everyone know, "...and the winner is, Flower and Grass!"

Every single bug in the crowd clapped and cheered for Flower and Grass.

"WE WON!" said Grass, pulling Flower in a hug.

"Hey, if you hug me any tighter, I'll be as flat as toast!" Flower laughed and hugged Grass back.

After a few months, they realised they were more than just friends, they fell in love with each other during the competition. So they decided to get married, had three little lady bugs of their own and lived happily ever after.

The End

## REEF

Rehet Kaur Grewal

“How can I find this flower?” Was the question that troubled Nico day and night. Legend has it that a dying coral reef could only be saved by the Crimson flower. No one had ever seen it apart from the great explorer John Timbel himself. The day after he had found the flower, John had taken it to his lab for further inspection. The next morning, John Timbel was found dead and the flower had disappeared. Nico was an enthusiastic 15 year old boy who’s only dream is saving the coral reefs. He lived with his mother in a small cottage just by the coastal shores along the Great barrier reef, Australia.

Nico had previously spent weeks in the library trying to find any information on the crimson flower. However, since no-one had documented it, there was no information on this flower other than the old book of legends in the far right hand corner of the history section in the library. It spoke of a God creating the flower in case there was a time in the future that the world would need it. The flower would only resurface for the one who truly believes in the power of coral reefs in maintaining the sealife around the world. Nico thought to himself, “If this isn’t the time the world needs to save the reefs, when will it be?” He had always said in his speeches: *“We should save what we have, or everything will just become a memory.”*

One evening, Nico was out on his boat fishing for junk like old fishing nets and plastic bottles in hope of cleaning the oceans even if it was just a little bit at a time. His hunt was very successful so far. He had managed to hook 4 tin cans, 1 old boot, and he even helped a poor turtle who was stuck in a fisherman’s net. The sun started to set, and Nico thought about going about packing up and going back home. He was reeling in his line when he had caught onto something. It was big, and heavy. Nico was very surprised when he brought it up to the surface and it turned out to be a wooden box. In the top, there was something carved into the lid. It said..... **GASP!** Nico’s jaw fell to the floor when he read the words “With love, John Timbel” “What was that supposed to mean? Was John really alive? What is inside? How did the box end up in the ocean?” There were a million thoughts spending through Nico’s head. Nevertheless, he took the box to his house to take a look at it properly.

The moment that he got home, Nico started to search the box all over for a way to open it. Why couldn't he just open the lid, you ask? Well, a golden lock with a horse picture carved into it prevented him from doing so. It was getting late now, so Nico went to bed. The next morning, he got up, and dashed straight to the box. "What?" next to the box, there was a key sitting on the table. Now Nico was really curious. "where did the key come from? Who put it there?" His mind was racing. Upon further inspection, he realised that the key was golden, with the same image of a horse carved into it. Suddenly, it all made sense. Nico picked up the key and tried it in the lock..... it was a perfect fit! He could finally open the box. What was inside? The suspense was killing him! **GASP!** As he slowly lifted the lid, the whole room lit up and glowed breathtaking shades of luminous orange. Nico had never seen a more beautiful thing in his life. **THE CRIMSON FLOWER!** Everything was clear now that he knew what he had to do.

### ***TWO YEARS LATER***

Nico was known all around the world as the boy who changed everything. His name was in the history books, and Nico could never be more proud of himself. Now that the Crimson flower was planted in its rightful place. The waters were no longer murky and dirty, but crystal clear, and the coral had flourished in full abundance, as if they were thanking Nico with their vibrant colours. As he once said, "Anyone, anything, anytime, even the smallest act of kindness can change the world."

### **THE END**

## THE MAGICAL FOREST

Saanvi Garg

"Where am I?" spoke Isabelle, her voice sounding small in the deep forest. A rustling sound emerged from the bushes next to her and she froze. She let out a terrified sigh. Every tree looked the same. She was in a maze, trying helplessly to find a way out.

As she was wandering, time flew by. The sky had turned dark, and evening had come over the forest. The howls and cries of the forest creatures became louder and more ominous with every passing minute.

Isabelle glanced around the forest and found a small, fluffy bunny scampering around near her. The sight of the bunny relieved her, and she knew she had something to comfort her. It stopped by her shoes, sniffing her.

Isabelle scooped up the little bunny. It was soft and warm, like her favourite plush toy at home. She whispered to the bunny, "Little bunny, do you know the way out of this dark forest?"

"Sorry, no, I don't know," the little bunny replied, "but you can call me Bonnie." Isabelle felt shocked and scared again. She wondered if she would ever be able to get out of the forest.

"I know someone that might be able to help you." Isabelle smiled down at Bonnie. It had turned even darker now. They both huddled together for safety.

Bonnie led Isabelle to a small cottage in a clearing. The way to the house was marked by millions of tiny shimmering fireflies. They gleamed in the dark night like stars.

Inside the cottage, an old frog was wearing a weathered wizard's coat and a pointy hat. He was stirring a concoction in a massive cauldron. Spots of sticky lime green potion were peppered on his body and clothes. Isabelle felt a bit uncomfortable seeing the old frog. She hoped that he wouldn't hurt her.

Bonnie told the old frog everything that had happened. As she was telling the story, the wizard frog listened carefully. When she was finally done, he croaked, "I can cast a magic spell and help you get home."

Isabelle felt overjoyed. Happiness bubbled out of her like the many bubbles in the frog's boiling concoction. "But I need some special ingredients. If you collect them for me, I can cast the spell. I need some prickly purpleberry juice, 3 polka-dotted

mushrooms and, last but not least, sap from the whitest tree in the forest.” He hands them a basket with a diamond-shaped vial.

Isabelle and Bonnie left the cottage in a hurry to find the items. Finding the prickly purple berry juice and the polka dot mushrooms was easy enough. There was a massive purple berry tree right next to the cottage and various mushrooms grew aside the stone patch that led to it. They picked both items and started searching for the whitest tree in the forest after what seemed like a long, long time.

Isabelle had a great idea. They could climb the prickly purple berry tree to see over the treetops! They started climbing the tree. Scrambling up each branch took an eternity; the tree was a real challenge.

At the top, little Bonnie gasped, “Wow! What a wonderful view!” Indeed, it was beautiful. As they were searching for the whitest tree, a shooting star streaked by in the sky over their heads. “Quick, make a wish!” said Bonnie.

“I wish that I get home safely,” Isabelle said, clasping her hands together and closing her eyes.

“I wish my family becomes well again. My mum has been very sick for a few weeks now,” whispered Bonnie, sadly. Her eyes started welling up with tears. Isabelle comforted her by stroking her fur. In the distance, they saw the glowing light of a white tree.

They quickly scampered down the prickly purpleberry tree and towards the whitest tree in the land. They used a crystal axe from the old frog’s basket to chip away a tiny section of the trunk. The sparkling sap oozed out. Isabelle quickly angled the glass vial underneath the cut. Once the bottle was full to the brim, she corked it.

They made their way back to the old wizard frog’s cottage. The frog greeted them with a smile, “Have you acquired the three ingredients?”

“Yes!” replied Isabelle and Bonnie in unison. They handed him their basket. The old frog began making preparations for the spell, gathering his spell book, other magical ingredients, and his cauldron. He added the ingredients to the cauldron over a medium-high flame. Isabelle stirred the cauldron as he chanted an ancient spell. Bonnie watched on in astonishment. After adding the last ingredient, the magical tree sap, the substance glimmered and gurgled. In a puff of smoke, a majestic white pegasus appeared.

## THE MAGICAL FOREST

“Snowy, the Pegasus, will take you home,” proclaimed the wise old frog. Snowy extended a wing towards Isabelle and she clambered on.

“Thank you, Mr. Wizard and Bonnie. I’m so grateful to have you as my friends.” Isabelle said, waving goodbye at them.

“Don’t forget to come visit us from time to time,” squeaked Bonnie. The wise old frog smiled at the both of them.

The Pegasus strode through the entrance of the cottage and soared into the sky. As the Pegasus’ wings beat higher and higher, the sun began to rise. The morning sunlight illuminated the forest in beautiful green and golden tones. Her heart was full of joy and sadness at the thought of leaving her newfound friends.

As they flew closer and closer to Isabelle’s home, she whispered, “I will surely remember this adventure for the rest of my life.”













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